COWBOY-LIFE ROMANCES

Lariat

STORY MAGAZINE

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WRITTEN WITH ACTION"

SEÑOR SILVER-GUNS
by
ROLLIN BROWN

BLACK HORSEMAN OF THE BADLANDS
by
WALT COBURN

THE HELL-CAT OF RUSTLER'S RANGE
by JAMES P. OLSEN

"... BUT THE STRANGER DIDN'T SCARE"
by JOHN G. PEARSOLL

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Lariat
STORY MAGAZINE

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

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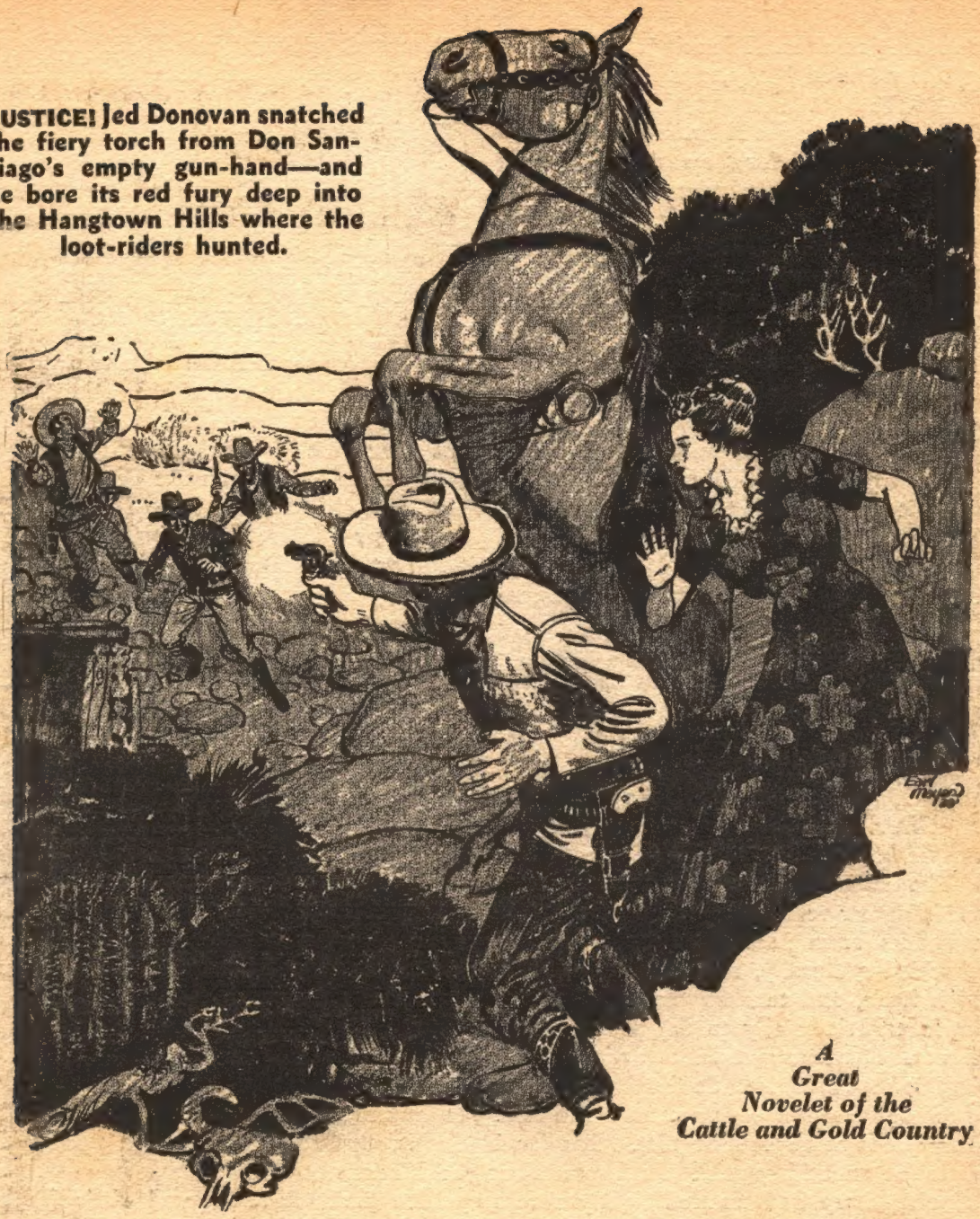


JUSTICE! Jed Donovan snatched the fiery torch from Don Santiago's empty gun-hand—and he bore its red fury deep into the Hangtown Hills where the loot-riders hunted.

A Great Novelet of the Cattle and Gold Country

SEÑOR SILVER-GUNS

By ROLLIN BROWN

ONE moment the buckskin was trotting cautiously along the night trail. The next moment the horse was down, kicking out its life. And underhoof Jed Donovan heard the singing whang of a tight-stretched rawhide rope. The saddle had up-ended under him like a catapult as the buckskin's hindquarters rose and somersaulted high with the downhill momentum of the fall. With a rider's instinct Donovan had loosened boots from stirrups. Somewhere a voice yelled in shrill Spanish, *"Hola!"* The black earth rose and met him with an awful jolt, and Donovan knew

no more just then. His mind was a blank.

The rattle of heavy, clanking spurs ran across the trail. A squat, thick-shouldered figure bent over the rider, hunkered down on legs too small for the rest of the man's bulk, and a great peaked sombrero blotted the star-sprinkled sky above.

The man called, "*Aquí*—here he is! He lies here waiting peaceful as a slumbering child." His thick-lipped grin was wolfish in the dark.

Hands loosened Donovan's gun-belts holding the handsome pair of bone-handled .44 guns. Skillful fingers explored his pockets. The man grunted softly, the blade of a knife glinted thinly under the stars and slit open the front of Donovan's shirt. The man loosed the moneybelt strapped next to his skin. He held it up. Two other figures stood behind now, and somewhere at a distance a fourth man was leading horses through the rocks. The mountains walling in this canyon rose black above them.

The moneybelt clinked. The man said, "See to his horse! There may be more in the saddlepockets, or tied in the toes of his *tapaderos*. Are you thieves or only gaping *muchachos?* Move now!"

The hands explored the seams of Donovan's leather vest, feeling for gold or other valuables sewn in the lining. The man chuckled gutturally, squatted back on his high heels, and touched the blade of the knife experimentally to the prone rider's throat. Donovan groaned and stirred, rolling his head sidewise. In that instant some measure of consciousness returned to him. His hands were full of dirt. His head swam in an aching void. And something stinging-sharp had crawled lightly across his throat.

One of the *ladrónes* said, "This horse is dead! His neck snapped so as he fell end over end across our rope. But the saddle is worth a hundred *pesos* maybe. There is nothing else."

"Too bad." The man bending over Donovan felt for matches. There was a faint scratch and then a point of phosphorescent glow that kindled and broke into flame as the sulphur head ignited. "So! I like to see what a face looks like before I cut the throat beneath. It is pleasant when one finds an enemy. But this one I have never seen. A stranger riding a little-frequented trail he himself did not know well, *verdad!*" The man shrugged his thick shoulders. Murder was an every-day job with him.

THROUGH slitted lids Donovan saw the dull illumination flicker on a pocked, heavy-featured *cholo* face, glistening on black, tiny eyes that were bloodthirsty as a weasel's. One of the hands shielding the light was brown, powerful; the other was grotesque with two fingers missing so that it looked like a three-tined hook. Donovan mumbled incoherently. At the same time his hand touched the rough hardness of a rock on the ground at his side, and closed around it. His gun-belts no longer bolstered his hips, he realized. The rest needed no explanation.

Every wayfarer across these California hills, every rider up the roads or trails into the rich, raw country, and every messenger and coach headed out again toward the broad Sacramento of the settlements faced the chance of just such a rendezvous with trail robbers and death. Kurt Allison, recently appointed United States Marshal, had gone over all of this with him, forging plans which Donovan knew by heart.

Lawlessness reigned rampant on every side. Conflict rose between the old Spanish-Mexican grants and the new rush of land grabbers and corrupt officials. Meantime the rich placer claims continued to pour out their flood of wealth from the hills and Sierra. For every man with money or dust in his pockets there seemed to be another ready to thieve and murder for it, and no trail was safe against the bold *ladrón* bands.

The dark, three-fingered *cholo* leaning over Donovan licked wet lips. The match dropped. With all the power he could gather in his legs Donovan jack-knifed his knees up against his chest and kicked at the spot where the face had been. The sole of his right boot struck and toppled the man. There was a muffled oath, a yell.

Donovan was over on his knees, slugging blindly with the rock.

A knife slithered past and clattered where it fell. Somewhere in the dark the squat, thick-shouldered *cholo* rolled and came up before him. The two men who had been stripping the saddle from the down horse rushed in to help. A gun ex-

ploded deafeningly. The flash outlined a charging dark-skinned face.

The weight of the rock in Donovan's fist hit yielding flesh. A man stumbled, fell. An arm came over Donovan's back. The point of a knife slid against his chest. He doubled from the hips, half-fell over the *ladrón* underfoot, and threw the man behind him over his shoulders bodily. He had dropped his only weapon, the rock. He drove head-on into a third charging figure. A shot exploded between them. Donovan's head struck the charging thief knocking him down.

The man with the horses was yelling. Donovan stumbled. Now hands caught his boots. He crawled up, kicking himself loose. Then the dry stems of chaparral whipped into his face as he ran, clawing through a trail-edge thicket, with the noise of pursuit breaking after him. He heard the rider who was leading the horses turn the animals free and spur back along trail, hoofs thudding.

He plunged through the thicket into the open ground beyond, running low. These trail robbers had the eyes of night owls. The horseman sighted him and shouted. Behind Donovan two men afoot broke through the brush. There was no way the hunted man could turn. The hoofs picked up with a rush, pounding hard across the open. Donovan tried to make the dark edge of a scrub oak tangle he could see ahead. Then within ten yards, plain under the dim starlight, he realized that another saddled horse was standing there.

The oak scrub stirred. "Trouble, pardner?" a drawled voice asked. "Duck an' give me a chance at 'em!"

A gun flamed before Donovan's eyes. He dropped and crawled. The gun spoke again. Twenty yards away, where the rider in pursuit had reined and turned from the first flash, an animal went down heavily. Fast as a hammer could be thumbed, three more shots exploded. There was a snarling yelp across the open, and the man in the oak scrub grunted, jamming in fresh shells. He waited.

"Ain't much longer now till dawn," he said. "Might as well stand 'em off right here, if there's goin' to be any fight. But I don't reckon. How come your throat ain't already slit, pardner? It seems to me you're a mighty lucky man."

II

STARS paled gradually. Dawn lighted the eastward hills with a slow rim of gray. Donovan studied a towheaded, boyish countenance that grinned at him through the leaves of the oak scrub where they squatted. The man was hardly more than twenty, a lean-muscled youngster with blue, reckless eyes. A pair of weighted saddlebags had been pulled off and hung across one shoulder. He held the frontier model Colt's .44, the gun that had spoken from the scrub, in one hand, and the rein ends of as fine a blooded running mare as Donovan had ever seen in the other. Donovan grinned and stuck out a hand.

"Cracken," the other named himself. "Billy Cracken. At present employed by the Esperanza Placer Company. Where was you headed for, stranger?"

"Hangtown Gulch," Donovan told him. He noticed the weight of bags cutting into the other's shoulder. "Missed the regular stage from Bradford Landing, so I hired a horse to ride across. Some Mexican I met on the road pointed out this cut-off trail, and since there wasn't any place to stop for the night I kept on riding. Figured I'd stop at the Alcorta *rancho* this mornin'."

"The looks of it, they got your money and weapons."

Donovan rubbed his throat. "A rope was stretched across the trail. My horse hit it and went down. I never rightly knew what happened till I seen a face bendin' over me, a match held in a hand that had three fingers like a grapplin' hook. They'd already robbed me then."

Billy Cracken whistled. "Reckon you must have had the honor to be robbed by Three-Finger José himself—and I'll tell you, stranger, there's few alive that can say as much. Been five-six weeks now since I crossed this particular stretch of trail myself, and I wasn't expectin' trouble till I heard the ruckus and a couple of shots ahead. Then you come plowin' down through that brush and I just had time to climb off in this scrub. Had I been pushin' Nellie as is usually the case, I reckon it would have been the pair of us that went over that rope fu'st. Sure, it's a regular trick of theirs—the devils!"

"I'm thankin' you for my life, Cracken."

Flame touched the streak of gray dawn in the east. In the growing light Billy Cracken studied the brushy ridges and the trail where it climbed through a far rocky notch. There was no sound over all the wild reach of foothill land, except the stirring of a dawn wind through the canyon, rustling the leaves of live-oak and sycamore, and the fluted calling of a crested quail. Cracken stretched and tucked the .44 in a worn leather holster under one armpit.

"They got no stomach much for a fight with hot lead," he said. "Although when cornered, any thievin' coyote in the pack will fight like a wolf. But I reckon, stranger, best thing for either of us is to head back down-canyon till it joins the Hangtown road beyond. From there three-four hours steady walkin' will take you into camp, or you might get the loan of a horse at the Alcorta *rancho.* Me, I'm carryin' two hundred ounces from the Esperanza clean-up in these bags and got to go on. But grantin' we keep shy of ambush, there ain't nothin' on four hoofs that can outrun Nellie in the open."

The horse that Billy Cracken's gun had downed across the opening ahead had been stripped of its saddle silently some time in the dark. He led the way down-trail, over the mark of his own climbing track. The sun topped the ridges in the east. Through the lowering slot of hills beyond, the grassy floor of a wide foothill valley opened, sprinkled with wild lupine and the springtime gold of yellow poppies.

PRESENTLY the trail wound out of the canyon and joined the deep-cut ruts of a road traveling up the valley's edge. A mile distant across the grass, set in a grove of giant live-oaks, the old tiled roof and white-plastered 'dobe walls of a *hacienda* glistened under the slanting flood of early sunlight. Donovan stopped and studied it, remembering other days.

"Yeah, yonder's the Alcorta *rancho,*" Billy Cracken said. "But like I was sayin', if you can't get a horse there, just follow on along this road afoot and you'll reach Hangtown Gulch before the morning's out. What you better do is go on up to the Esperanza Placer when you get there, and tell the boss you're a friend of mine that's had some hard luck on trail. In the gulch it's every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost. But the boss will let you sleep in my bunk and eat at the company table till tomorrow when I get back. Then I'll help you get located proper. The boss' name is Ratch—Clem Ratch."

"Thanks, I'll do that." Donovan nodded. "I'm wantin' to see Ratch anyhow."

Billy Cracken eyed him sidewise. "Huh! You hadn't mentioned that. Ratch a friend of your'n, or was you aimin' to get a pick-and-shovel job on the Esperanza Placer?"

"Neither. It's a different kind of a job," Donovan explained. "The kind of a stand Ratch has made in here is well-known. A few others among the law-and-order element have been behind him, facing corrupt officials that a careless camp has elected on one hand, and on the other this trail outlawry that's got the country by the throat. Now the new U. S. Marshal aims to be in here some time next week to do something about it, countin' on the weight of men like Ratch to back the issue. My job is with U. S. Marshal Kurt Allison."

"You wearin' a deputy marshal's badge?"

"No. Just a pair of guns that got took off me back younder." Donovan grinned wryly. "But I used to know this country some—eight years ago, as a youngster. Came through this way with wagons. Things have changed."

Cracken had climbed to saddle on the blooded running mare, the gold bags he carried swung across his thighs. His reckless young eyes glinted. "Pardner, I reckon you'll find Clem Ratch mighty happy to talk to you. There ain't hardly a week goes by at Hangtown Gulch that don't find some poor devil murdered and robbed of his poke, or shot down on the trails. The Esperanza's lost its share of gold. No stage is safe along the roads. We have to run out each clean-up of dust as best we can by stealth and fast horseflesh, like I'm doin' now. Well, reckon Nellie and me had best be gettin' on our way. See you later." Cracken lifted a hand. "S'long."

The mare turned and took the road at an easy lope. Donovan stood and watched till Billy Cracken and the Nellie horse disappeared around a bend. Then he walked on toward the old Alcorta *rancho,* remembering things that had happened here those eight years ago.

A broad worn path, marked by hoofs and the rough lumbering wheels of *carretas,* crossed the valley meadow from the road. Under those great live-oaks that sheltered the *hacienda* yards, Donovan could recall the long heaped tables, smoking barbecue pits, and all that gay assemblage of *rancheros* and their ladies, gathered from a hundred miles around to celebrate the occasion of Don Santiago Flores de Alcorta's birthday, as he had first seen the place.

THEY had come down this valley from the high Sierra crossing—six dilapidated wagons, remnant of a great settler train that had split on the Humboldt, these drawn by gaunt, shambling beasts and led by the worn, slow-voiced man who had been Jed Donovan's father.

Snow in the Sierra passes had killed most of their stock and the desert behind had taken its toll. There were scenes back there that the eyes of no sixteen-year-old boy should ever have witnessed. Death and burning heat, and awful cold and starvation across the mountains. This weary, broken, exhausted file of men and their patched-up wagons had plodded down the valley, across the rich placer gravel which was now Hangtown Gulch; and at the height of the *fiesta* they had come in sight of the oaks and house and wide meadow land.

A girl had been dancing the fandango, stamping her red-heeled slippers to the sound of castanets and music of guitars. Then Don Santiago's son, Ramón, a boy of fifteen, had suddenly shouted above the applause and music, pointing up the valley. A half score of men, on the finest horses young Jed Donovan had ever seen, had come riding up toward them, led by the boy on a racing bareback mount. The lad's face was pale and handsome with fine, dark eyes.

"Señores, where come you from?" he had cried in excited Spanish.

And Jed Donovan's father, who knew the tongue from days on the Texas border, gestured back to the mountains. "From across the ranges yonder, son. We need food and rest. With permission we'll stop here by the stream and stay a day or two till our beasts grow stronger. We're settlers, hoping to locate along the Sacramento lands."

"But, no!" A gray, bearded man rode up, slim as a youth in his saddle, wearing a short braided jacket not unlike a vest and a flat-crowned black sombrero. He bowed. "I am Señor Santiago Alcorta. In the name of my house and my guests, I bid you welcome and ask you to come and share our tables. For tonight, for tomorrow, for as long as you will honor me. My house is yours."

The Spanish-California boy had swung his bareback mount alongside Jed who walked beside the near wagon in his torn buckskins and tattered clothing, eying the long rifle the wagon-train boy carried. He flashed a white, even smile which Jed answered with a grin.

"Buenos días," Jed said, showing off the few words of Spanish his father had taught him.

Ramón held down a hand. "Mount and ride behind me, *amigo."* And so Jed had, understanding the gesture, if not the words.

Those had been different days. Women in their *mantillas* and bright, gorgeous shawls waited under the oaks. All that afternoon, all next day, the feasting and *fiesta* continued. Men rode their splendid horses in games of skill with the *riata* and short lance, displaying unequaled horsemanship.

For ten leagues ride all this land belonged by grant to the house of Alcorta, as it had for a hundred years and more past. Don Santiago had no knowledge of how many thousand of his cattle grazed thereon.

Now all that had changed. Five years later a prospector from the old gold fields on the American had stumbled on the rich placer ground in the mountain gulch beyond, and a tide of sweaty, gold-mad men poured over these hills, hoping the strike would equal earlier rushes. Late settlers, finding the best lands already claimed by others, moved upon the old grants and squatted behind guns.

Cattle, once worthless except for hides and export tallow, were now worth stealing for beef. Everywhere unscrupulous land grafts were perpetrated against the old *ranchos.* Public officials, large and small, were up to their necks in corruptness. Thugs and killers walked the camps and settlements. Taxes were doubled and trebled with the sole purpose of bankrupting the old *haciendados;* and in the hills

the wild and bloodthirsty *ladrónes* bands formed and plundered the roads and trails.

NO such welcome as that which had greeted those gaunt, weary men from across the mountains, their shambling stock and tattered wagons, now waited Jed Donovan ahead. The yards under the massive trees were bare, the old barbecue pits tumbled in. Except for a worn *carreta*, recently loaded, but not yet yoked, the place might almost have been deserted. He stopped on the veranda tiles that led toward a half-open door.

A dark, heavy-featured Indian servant came through the door beyond, bearing a weighty chest over one shoulder. The man halted, stared at Donovan with black, opaque eyes for half a moment, mumbling words under his breath. Slowly he swung the chest from shoulder and stood it upright against the wall.

"So you come to take possession of the house and lands now?" he asked gutturally in the Spanish Donovan had learned to speak fluently in these years. "You waste no time, it seems—you and the other *gringo* dogs like you! There is little enough left of all this *rancho* that once was known from Monterey to the mountains. But now you take even that! What will anyone, except the thieves and *politicos*, have left in the end? Servant of this house since I was born, I am sorry to have lived long enough to see this."

Donovan shook his head, looking at the man. But before he could make answer, a different voice called from within the house, "What are you mumbling, Juan? Put the chest in the *carreta* with the rest of the belongings we cannot leave behind. This is only for a while. Land thus sold for taxes under its owners may still be redeemed for a period, and once old friends learn what has happened, a loan will be extended us. We will come back—"

The voice stopped. A slim girl with a *mantilla* over her head and wide full skirts stood in the doorway, looking past the servant. Donovan suddenly remembered a child of ten with big, grave eyes and dark, soft hair—Ramón's sister. To a boy of sixteen, who had crossed the mountains, carrying a long gun like a man, such a child was hardly to be noticed. But something about this slender young woman and that little girl was the same. It was in her eyes, he thought: dark and still very grave, luminous as a night sky with stars in their depths. He saw the puzzled look that crossed her delicate features.

He said slowly, "Señorita, I do not understand what your servant means. But once, a long while ago, perhaps you remember a few wagons that came across this way. The first of their kind that you had ever seen, I believe. The others traveled on presently. But my father and I stayed till early summer."

She stared at him. "But, of course—Don Jed!" she cried. "Many times since then have we spoken of you and your father. Only the other day Ramón heard some word of you from the Sacramento."

"Ramón is here?"

"Not at this time but we expect him soon. Don Santiago must know at once and welcome you." She turned in the doorway. "Come enter the house of Alcorta again, Don Jed, after so long a while"; and then, remembering, the girl flushed. "Do not speak to my father of the *rancho* and land, please; or the many head of cattle and horses we once had. Because we have lost so much. Perhaps it is best that I tell you first."

Donovan said, "I do not understand about that, *doncella*."

"It is hard to understand," she told him. "There was trouble over lines and the measure of the old grant. Good valley land was taken to the west and held by force. Hundreds of miners crossed this way toward the new gold strike, and many panned and staked claims on the *rancho* itself. Horses were stolen and cattle killed. Many men butchered beef with our Barra Cruz brand on the hides for food, and at first this did not seem to matter. No hungry man ever asked for food or lodging at these doors and was refused. But suddenly it seemed we had few cattle left.

"Then new taxes were put on the land. My father sold some of the grant to pay, and he was robbed on the road home with the money, so it was necessary to sell more. But it was still not enough. He even took his silver guns, a gift from General Vallejo, and sold them for what they were worth. But that money went like the rest. Now this very valley, the *hacienda*, these very yards have been sold to a stranger

for the amount of the taxes, and he has warned us we must leave. These things have changed my father, as you will see.

"But there is still hope," she continued. "We have friends of the old days—the Viguas, the Alvarados and Morenos. Our near neighbors, the Garcias, are poor as we are; but any of the others would sell a thousand head of cattle to loan us the money. Ramón has been gone a week, to see to it. But meantime we have been ordered to move, and to avoid trouble this seems best. Later, with money, Ramón will bring us back. Come now, and I will take you to Don Santiago."

THE old Californian sat in a small, beamed room that opened off the great bare hall within. Daylight from a deep window behind showed Donovan the stoop of his shoulders, and a little open fire, burning before the massive carved chair in which Don Santiago rested, brought out the gray, thin lines of his face with a dim flickering radiance. He sat with his head lifted, eyes on the portrait of a woman that hung above the mantel-piece.

Hearing their steps on the tiles, he asked in a low, intense voice, "Is that Ramón with you, Dolores? Has he come at last?"

"No, but this is an old friend, father," the girl answered. "Remember, long ago, the man called Señor Donovan and his son who came this way with wagons? This is Don Jed, that boy. Changed much, but still I knew him immediately when he spoke."

The old Californian turned deep-sunken eyes. His fragile, bony hands tightened on the arms of the chair and he rose slowly, studying Donovan. "Yes, I remember well," he said at last. "You have grown tall like Ramón, with the look of a *caballero* about you. Welcome to this house again, my son. Dolores, have Juan bring glasses and a bottle of wine here to celebrate this occasion. You and Ramón were great friends, Don Jed. You must stay with us till his return."

"But, father, you forget," the girl said.

The old man shook his head. "I forget nothing," he said. "Ramón will be home today. He has been gone a week—far longer than necessary. He has stayed for some *fiesta* with friends, loitering on the way. Today, surely, he will come."

His eyes returned to that portrait of a woman with her lacy *mantilla* and high carved comb that hung in a gold frame over the mantel, above a pair of old crossed duelling rapiers, and Donovan knew this must be a picture of Dolores' mother. Presently the Indian servant brought wine and glasses, and crossed the little room. Through the door left open into the great hall Donovan heard the clip-clop of hoofs approaching, stopping in the yard outside. Horses stamped; there was the creak of saddle leather. The Indian halted, putting down the bottle and glasses, and turned around to look.

"Like I told you, Bowie," a husky-throated voice said from the yards. "They don't believe you mean business till you bring a force of men on the ground an' boot 'em off. These Californios had the run of the land too long; they still don't know there's any authority but their own. Wall, this-hyar's your party, Bowie. Name the way you want to handle it."

"Move 'em out any way you have to do it," a second voice answered. "You're sheriff, ain't you, Hooker? Take Legs along. I'm leavin' three men here to look after things for a while. Whatever ain't moved out of the house now stays behind. They've had their warnin'."

Dolores had not returned with the servant. Don Santiago stood stiff as one of the blades of that crossed pair of duelling rapiers on the wall under the picture behind him; and then moved forward. Outside, the girl's voice was suddenly audible, speaking in swift Spanish.

"What's she say, Hooker?"

"Somethin' about her brother and some money's he's gone to get," the first voice said. The man laughed huskily. "Too late for that. Anyhow he won't be able to raise it."

Donovan followed the thin figure of the old Californian. Across the big bare space of hall, Dolores stood in the veranda doorway, half a dozen horses and riders grouped outside. Spurs raked across the veranda tiles. A bony, angular man with a drooping, tobacco-stained mustache pushed through the doorway beside the girl. Behind him appeared a lithe, bleak-faced rider whose eyes shifted continually, studying everything that moved with a quick intensity, two handsome pearl-han-

dled guns at hips. The first man wore a brassy sheriff's star.

"Take a look around, Legs," the sheriff said.

He noticed the old Californian crossing the bare hall with Donovan beside him, and stopped. The sheriff started to make some fumbling statement in Spanish, and Donovan cut him short.

"All right, tell me about it in so many plain English words," Donovan snapped. "Just how do you figure you're going to get away with this?"

THE lithe man, called Legs, became utterly motionless, his two hands dropped beside the pearl-handled butts of his guns. His bleak face turned expressionless as stone. The sheriff peered hard through the dim-lighted room at Donovan, jaw dropping under his drooping stained mustache. He muttered something. Outside a saddle creaked and another man of the group dismounted suddenly. He was solid of build, square-faced, with a corded, thick neck above the hunch of heavy shoulders.

He said, "What's the matter in there, Hooker?"

He walked across the veranda tiles with his square-jawed head thrust forward, boots striking hard. Legs waited motionless, but the sheriff turned. Don Santiago had crossed to his daughter's side. The man stopped just inside the door, the thrust of his eyes on Donovan.

"What's your interest in this matter?" he said. "I hold tax papers on this house, two leagues of the valley land, cattle and horses. I've bought that title with hard cash and intend to keep it. You're trespassing on my property, mister—you and the former owners. They're been warned to leave. I've got men here and a sheriff's authority to establish my claim. Now does that make things clear to you in so many plain English words? Or do you want me to use force? I can do that, too, if you want."

Donovan said, "Let's see your tax title papers."

"Sure." The man pulled a stamped document from pocket and handed it over. The paper, written in Hangtown Gulch, showed a date three days old. It was signed by acting county officials, the sheriff witnessing. The man's name was Bowie Flood; his address, the Pay Streak Saloon, Hangtown Gulch. Donovan handed the paper back.

Two more riders had dismounted and shoved into the doorway, leaving one man to hold the horses. Watching him with anxious eyes, Don Santiago put a swift question.

Donovan drew a slow, deep breath. "No, there's nothing you can do right now," he told the old Californian. "Except leave your house. Legally, according to his paper, this man has bought your property for taxes and so can show his right to take possession. On paper that's the story. Now the only thing you can do is leave. Later there will be a reckoning."

The old man bowed his head, and with one arm about his daughter he moved back into the house. The sheriff looked sidewise and grinned under his mustache, and Bowie Flood settled his square, heavy frame back against one casement of the door. The man called Legs prowled with his lithe, cat-like tread about the big bare hall. Donovan waited, holding himself in check with a straining effort.

Presently Don Santiago came from the beamed little room beyond, the pair of Toledo duelling rapiers from above the mantel in one hand and the framed painting of the woman who had been his wife under the other arm. Dolores joined him outside the doorway, and together they crossed the hall toward the outer door. The Indian servant had passed the front of the house with a slow-footed ox team which he was yoking to the *carreta.* At the same time Donovan heard new hoofs striking in across the yards and the arrival of still another horseman outside.

The lines in Don Santiago's face had grown perceptibly deeper. He came slowly across the room that had been built more than a century ago by the first Alcorta to come to this land, eyes set straight ahead. Dolores' head was lifted as she walked beside him. Then just as the old man reached the doorway, one of the burly riders standing beside Flood put out a hand and grabbed the frame of the picture.

"Look at this, Bowie," he said. "This picture frame's plated with gold, ain't it? You ain't lettin' him walk out with anything like that."

THE rapiers clattered to the floor. Don Santiago caught at the picture with both hands, and with a heavy laugh the burly rider wrenched it from his grasp. The rider evidently understood a little Spanish. "Here, the picture ain't worth nothin'. You can have it back," he said. "The frame's all I want."

He yanked a corner of the canvas loose; halfway down the side of the frame the canvas ripped and tore across the face of the painting. Don Santiago's face turned white as death. For ten seconds he stood utterly motionless. Then swift as a young *vaquero* tying a wild mountain steer, he stooped. A hand flashed down. Donovan shouted once, trying to stop it—words that the old Californian never heard.

In a sweep old fingers caught the etched handle of one of the fallen rapiers that had long ago come from Spain The blade shot up. The burly rider with the picture still in his grasp had time to take a half-step backward, striking down with the heavy frame. The frame hit the lightning point of the rapier, deflected it from his chest. The steel slithered. With the weight of Don Santiago's lunge behind it, the blade speared through the flesh of the rider's hip.

Donovan drove forward. The angular sheriff was pulling at a holstered gun. Faster than either, the lithe, cat-muscled figure of Legs moved and drew. While the burly man dropped the picture frame and his mouth opened with a yell of pain, the shot exploded. Legs fired only once. Don Santiago crumpled and fell limp against a side of the wide door. His fingers clawed, and then convulsively closed. Legs remained standing four or five paces back in the room, the drawn gun smoking in his hand.

Dolores had screamed. She dropped on knees beside her father. Donovan's hands reached empty hips. He came around, head low, lips a compressed, bloodless line. The sheriff, holding a drawn gun now, said, "I don't know what your ante is in this game, stranger. But you make a move and I'll drill you where you stand. Get it straight!"

Legs blew powder smoke from the barrel of his gun, the stony, expressionless look of his face unchanged. Boots ran across the outer veranda. There was a low, stifled cry. Flood and one of the riders outside had grappled with the newcomer Donovan had heard ride in. The man was dusty from the trails, tall, with fine dark eyes under a flat sombrero, and Donovan recognized Ramón Alcorta.

III

THEY stood in pouring bright sunlight about the tiny mission chapel yard, the few women in black with somber *rebosas* drawn about their heads, the men waiting with wide hats in hand. The *padre* who had come for this last service spoke his words; the body of Don Santiago Flores de Alcorta, *caballero* of the old days, was lowered slowly to its resting place.

Clem Ratch, of the Esperanza Placer, stood on the edge of the little crowd, a muscular, wide-shouldered figure in his boots and freshly washed miner's shirt. Beside him was a gambler in immaculate frock coat and snowy linen, a gray plug hat held against his chest. And on the other hand Jed Donovan waited, head bent.

They were the only three who had ridden the distance from the Hangtown Gulch gold camp. The others were the Garcias and the Alvarados, old families in this California land, friends of the Alcorta house as long as any could remember.

At the grave side Dolores Alcorta was standing beside Ramón, very slim and small to look at, head bent, and her face shielded by a *rebosa*. But Donovan could see Ramón's tight-drawn aquiline features and his set lips move a little silently, as though Ramón made some unheard vow. The *padre* finished, the first shovel full of earth was sprinkled down. A bell tolled softly from the little *capilla* tower.

Donovan turned away, hands clenched at his sides. Ratch and the gambler followed him toward their animals waiting under the shade of nearby sycamores where two carriages and other saddled beasts stood. The three mounted silently, striking the road back to Hangtown Gulch. Behind them, the carriages were turned and led around for the women. The men of the old families swung slowly to their saddles.

Finally Jack Russell, the gambler, said, "I come in here three years ago, right after gold was first panned in the gulch.

Broke, without a cent in my pockets. Sick. For two weeks I stayed at the Alcorta house and the old man and his daughter nursed me through. Nothin' that they had was too good for me, and they'd never seen me before I come across the fields that night, muddy and so weak I hardly thought I'd make the last steps to their door light. Later I struck a lucky claim, sold out and made a stake to back my table. I could have spared 'em most any sum of cash they needed. All they'd had to do was to let me know."

"Ramón had gone to old friends of the family finally," Donovan said. "*Rancheros* like themselves. He'd ridden as far as Monterey. All the old grants are going the same way. Crooked litigation, taxes, squatters. Cattle and horses are all being stolen. Ramón came home as penniless as he started. I want to know some more about this man Bowie Flood."

Ratch hunched wide, stiff shoulders. "You seen him, didn't you? You seen the whole thing—that ought to tell you all you want to know. Flood owns the Pay Streak Saloon; and friends of his, tax collector and assessor, the sheriff, a judge and another one or two I forget, form the political set-up within the present county lines. Hangtown Gulch elects the outfit. Flood furnishes the free liquor. There's more votes in the gulch than all the rest of the section. They play it hand in glove. Like this business at the Alcorta *rancho* yesterday."

Donovan had walked into Hangtown Gulch last night and found Ratch at the Esperanza Placer diggings above. Clem Ratch was an engineer by profession, a placer miner by experience; selected by the San Francisco syndicate that owned the group of Esperanza claims to handle the digging and sluice work. He spoke Spanish fluently and had been in the country for years.

"Nobody sees it yet. The camp's too busy diggin' gold or spendin' it," Ratch continued. "And Hangtown Gulch runs this whole section. To the man busy with his diggin' and sluice boxes it don't matter much what happens to some old landowner like Alcorta. Your ordinary miner don't care where his beef comes from, so long as he gets it. Or when he needs a horse the brand don't matter, if the animal comes cheap. But in the end a faction like this Flood hook-up ain't goin' to be content with doin' its robbin' away from home by methods it can cover over as legal.

"What a U. S. Marshal will be able to do against things as they stand is a question. But this man Allison is straight. He'll get the backin' of maybe half a dozen men of us in the camp that can look farther than our noses. But I don't know what else, Donovan. We'll have to wait and see. Whatever else he is, Kurt Allison is nobody's fool and nobody's political puppet."

THE three rode back into Hangtown Gulch in the late afternoon. A single rutted, dusty street stretched up the floor of the gulch for a short two hundred yards here, lined with log shacks and 'dobe-walled structures and a few square-faced board buildings, the lumber whipsawed from green timber. The narrowed hills rose steeply on either hand.

Already the line of shadow from westerly walls crawled across the camp town and strip of adjacent creekbed gravel where a few red-shirted miners worked sluices and cradles. The main diggings lay beyond, higher on the two forks of the creek.

Ratch swung from saddle at the stage barn and yards at the near end of the street, and Jack Russell, the gambler, left his mount here. Midway up the length of street ahead, across on the other side, stood the board front of the Pay Streak Saloon. Roughly garbed men, muddy as they had left the sluices and gravel holes, mingled with townsmen, boomers, riffraff and frock-coated gentry from the Sacramento, moving in and out of the Pay Streak's swinging doors.

A heavy oxcart, loaded with timbers from the mountains, rolled and creaked its way down street. A knot of sweat-streaked horses with big-horned Mexican saddles stood and dozed before a mud-walled *cantina,* and the occasional tinkle of Spanish music came faintly through other street noises. Four or five miners met a newcomer who held up a buckskin poke, and the party trooped into the nearest bar.

Jack Russell disappeared inside the Nugget, his own gambling establishment, two doors above the Pay Streak. Donovan turned into a square one-room log build-

ing across lots from the stage outfit, marked "GUNS & MINING SUPPLIES." He asked to see weapons.

The place was littered with stacks of shovels, picks and axes, open kegs of nails and hinges, shelves lined with hammers, saws and heaps of miner's pans. An end window in the room was barred, but covever with an oiled deerskin pane in place of glass. In the dim interior Donovan failed to identify a man lounged in a corner by the door, till he turned to feel the balance and glance across sights of the .44 gun put in his hand. The man stirred then with an easy, cat-like tread and moved across the room from the door corner. His bleak face gave no sign of recognition. But Donovan stiffened rigid, his lips closed tight.

He put the gun back on the rough board counter. "Let's see another," he told the hardware merchant.

His eyes happened to fall on a pair of used silver-mounted .44's that lay in the back of the drawer and it reminded him of something Dolores had said.

"Did those belong to Don Sanitago de Alcorta?" Donovan asked the storekeeper.

"That's right. How did you know?" the man said. "I paid real money for these."

Without answering Donovan took one of the silver guns to the door and loaded it. He aimed at the thin-peeled stump of a pine some fifteen or twenty yards distant up the steep hillside above camp, and fired twice deliberately. Both shots hit the half-rotted wood with tiny bursts of splinters.

"Couldn't buy better weapons," the merchant said, and turned to that lithe, cold-faced man who now lounged in the doorway, "Ain't that right, Legs?"

The merchant, loading the other gun, handed it to him. One instant the man called Legs was leaning back casually against the outside log wall of the store; the next, faster than the eye could follow in detail, the gun was raised, spitting so fast the hard blast of shots all ran together in one rattle of sound, blurred by the swift returning echo from hill and other building fronts. Leg's right hand dropped. He gave the gun back to the merchant empty.

"Sure, them silver guns are all right," he said in a dry, toneless voice. "All that's needed is the proper man behind 'em."

He walked on up the street, turning into a doorway across from the Pay Streak where a voice hailed him. More men were coming down the road from the main diggings up-creek now. The oxcart turned into yards beside the stage barn with its load, and a rider, coming into town the other way on a *palomino* horse, splashed through the shallow creek ford below.

The merchant grinned. "Now I wonder what Legs meant by that." But when he heard Donovan's voice the grin froze on his face.

"I will take these guns." Donovan said. "Anson spoke the truth when he said they would need the proper hand behind them."

THEY went back inside the store. The horseman riding up from the ford passed along the street outside; and while Donovan was talking price, Clem Ratch crossed from the stage yards and entered the log room. Ratch assured the merchant he would stand behind the bill, since Donovan was unknown in camp and broke. The two went outside, Donovan carrying the guns under his arm with the belts wrapped around holsters.

Ratch said, "Put 'em on!"

Donovan looked at him. "What's that?"

"Ramón Alcorta just rode into town. That *palomino* yonder is his horse, standin' with them others in front of that *cantina* now. There's only one thing would have brought him into town like this. We might be able to stop it. Suppose you'd seen your own father shot down the way Don Santiago was? Suppose you'd seen Flood take everything and could get no justice otherwise—?"

Donovan was buckling on the belts. "Did he go into that *cantina* first?"

"Don't know." Ratch ran beside him.

Halfway up the street ahead, they saw the shoulders of a miner entering the Pay Streak halt between swinging doors. With equal suddenness, the man threw himself backward and dove for shelter of the outside wall. A throaty voice yelled within, and then cut short. Two shots crashed from the interior of the Pay Streak—a dull, muffled volume. Men on the street, moving here and there, stopped or jumped for handy doorways. A third shot followed. There was the crash and tinkle of broken glass. Then the hard, rapid volley of three or four guns speaking all at once.

Donovan had one gun in his hand and

was running forward. There was no hope that he and Ratch could do anything now. Ahead, Ramón backed from the doors of the Pay Streak. He stopped and fired the three remaining shells in his gun as he backed from the saloon, as fast as a thumb could work hammer. Splinters ridged up from the swinging flimsy doors after him. He lurched, threw the empty gun away, and started across the street for the handsome *palomino* at the *cantina* rack.

The doors flapped open. Immediately guns roared in the street. The interior of the saloon was roaring confusion.

Lurching, Ramón ran across the street and, with the superb horsemanship of all these Californians, caught the *palomino* and vaulted into the saddle. Donovan realized that Legs Anson had just now run from a doorway this side of the *cantina* into the street. With spur and rein the young Californian jumped the splendid animal under him across a wooden strip of camp sidewalk and on into the narrow space that opened between buildings off the street. Legs Anson had fired once at him across the milling knot of animals at the *cantina* rack. Legs turned and ran through the space between the near side of the *cantina* and a mercantile house next door.

Ratch grabbed Donovan's arm, yelling something. Donovan shook him off. Men from the Pay Streak were crossing the street ahead, every doorway disgorging its quota now. Bowie Flood ran from the jam in the Pay Streak's door, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Somewhere a heavy voice was yelling, "Get him behind them buildin's! He's ridin' back around for the ford. Sheriff Hooker's hit—"

DONOVAN headed across between two stores. The rear line of street buildings backed up against the steep slope of the hillside, and all manner of broken and worthless trash had been discarded behind the stores and bars here. A gun started up ahead of him. By the time Donovan reached the littered back alleyway, Ramón had quartered around and was racing past the rear of the stage yards for the ford.

He clung low over saddle, the big silver-maned horse stretched out under him. Other guns set up a sharp, new clamor as more men reached the rear line of buildings and took snap aim at the racing rider. Still in saddle, the big *palomino* running strong, Ramón disappeared.

Men headed on, running along the street or behind the line of buildings for the stage yards and the animals there. Donovan waited a moment. At a distance Legs paused and blew smoke from the barrel of his gun. He reloaded and dropped the weapon back into its holster. Then he turned and walked back through the space between *cantina* and the mercantile house as he had come.

No saddled horse remained tied at the *cantina* rack as Donovan returned to the street. Men coming out of the saloons had taken the nearest to hand. Ratch stood in front of the Pay Streak, and together he and Donovan entered the place.

The body of Sheriff Hooker had been lifted from the floor by the bar and stretched out on one of the wide gaming tables. The sheriff's angular, dissolute face was putty-colored and slack with death. Men coming back into the Pay Streak crowded around.

"Yeah, he just walked in through them doors, pullin' a gun as he entered," some bystander was explaining. "Bowie was sittin' in a four-handed game yonder at that far table. Hooker, standin' at the end of the bar, was closer. Hooker took one look at him, drew and tried to stop him. Warn't more'n four-five paces between 'em. Both fired at about the same instant—and Hooker fell.

"But it was Bowie this man wanted. Or maybe Legs Anson. He fired ag'in over heads of the crowd. Then it got too hot and he backed out the door, four-five guns cuttin' at him by then. I figure he was hit. Sure, they'll find him down road somewhere, lyin' where he's fell from the saddle."

Outside, Ratch said, "That might be best if they find him dead." He clenched calloused, muscular fists. "Bowie Flood could get away with murder in the Alcorta house, with the law and men behind him. Here it's different. Hooker was a duly elected sheriff; it don't matter what else Hooker was or what kind of a crook. It'll mean another hanging if Ramón's caught alive now. And if he ain't caught, it'll be outlawry among the trail thieves of this Three-Fingered José's kind."

Donovan saw again the delicate, slim features of Dolores Alcorta, her deep dark eyes, and words choked in his throat. . . .

THE stage into Hangtown Gulch that evening carried a tall, straight-shouldered man with iron-gray hair and a close-clipped mustache, something military in his bearing and step. He climbed from the stage, took a single piece of luggage from the rack and looked around the camp. A miner, coming from one of the near saloons, directed him to Jack Russell's gambling house. The Pay Streak was packed with a jam of men, discussing the happenings of that afternoon. Tired horses of riders returning empty-handed stood tied along street, awaiting their owners. Much loud talk, the clink of glasses and shuffle of heavy boots came from the saloon. The newcomer did not pause.

Two doors above he stepped into Jack Russell's place. The gambler rose from behind one of his three tables and a spare dealer slipped into his place. Jack Russell had the name of running the one straight gaming layout in the camp town, but tonight only some four or five miners and townsmen patronized the house. After a few words with the newcomer, Russell called one of these men who was the manager of the stage outfit.

As the three left and reached the outskirts of the camp, Russell turned aside to a tent room that was boarded and floored with sawed lumber, with canvas stretched to form upper walls and roof, and awoke the owner of the mercantile house down the street. They had to wait for the man to dress.

The four reached the Esperanza Placer on the right fork of the upper gulch some twenty minutes later afoot. Donovan was standing with Ratch in the one-room shack that served as the placer company's office, a swung kerosene lamp throwing an oily yellow glow over table, bare walls, tools and spare equipment stacked in one end of the room. Outside, the late shift at work in the diggings picked and shoveled gravel into the running sluices by the light of pine fires and flares. The Esperanza employed a score of laborers, working night and day while the gravel was in the rich pay. Ratch opened the shack's door.

Donovan came forward, grasping the newcomer's hard, lean hand. "Mighty glad to see you, Allison. You're here several days earlier than I expected from our last talk," Donovan said.

"May not be able to stay long this trip," the U. S. Marshal said. "There's trouble on the upper Sacramento."

Coming into the light, Marshal Kurt Allison's face showed the mark of weather and a multitude of fine wrinkles set about clear, gray eyes. He was not a talkative sort of man.

His early years had been spent with the United States Cavalry; he had scouted throughout the Southwest, taken part with the command of colonel in two Indian wars. Border-bred, Army man and civilian, most of his life had been spent on the shifting, westward edge of the march of territory and the frontier. His experience was vast, and as U. S. Marshal, appointed to this district, it had already been learned that the man was incorruptible.

Clem Ratch had never met him before, although correspondence had traveled between the two. In charge of the largest producing group of claims in the gulch, Ratch had more than his own personal reasons to be vitally interested in the course of any law-and-order action which would help conditions here. They sat around the bare-walled room on the two chairs in the place, a cot and boxes. Kurt Allison lit the end of a cheroot, listening to the talk of these men. Now and then he put a question.

"Too much has already happened to ever right the general wrongs that have been done in this country," he said finally. "The best we can do is forge a new code of law and justice resting on a rotten foundation, hoping to repair the past in a measure as time goes on. It's a country divided against itself. This camp has elected authorities to represent it. Presumably those authorities are using office and that power for corrupt purposes. But it's likely to take time to prove it. The trails have got to be cleaned up.

"I'm one man alone with a U. S. Marshal's badge behind me. I've got a few deputies, a few others, like Donovan here, who have ridden with me on other occasions. Whatever happens in this camp has got to depend on the backing you men and others put behind the issue. But I'm here

to make a start. If I have to leave sooner than expected, I'll be back."

Billy Cracken rode in before midnight on the dusty thoroughbred mare, grinning cheerfully. After the others had gone back to camp, for more than an hour Allison talked with this reckless, blue-eyed youngster who rode the trails with a ready gun and a fast horse, carrying the Esperanza dust outside.

Cracken said, "I noticed a crowd around the Pay Streak as I come up gulch and stopped to see what it all meant. Bowie Flood was dispensin' free liquor from the bar with most of the camp gathered inside the saloon or on the street outside. Legs Anson had just been appointed actin' sheriff, to look after the job Hooker is no longer able to handle by reason of being deceased."

ALLISON slept on a makeshift cot at the placer that night, and next morning went down to the camp. His moves were simple and direct. Half the morning he spent looking over records of claims and tax sales, talking to Flood, the county judge and others of the camp organization in power. He asked many questions, made few comments of his own. At the stage yards he lined up half a dozen good horses which would be kept ready to mount a small picked posse at any time. At noon he joined Donovan who was waiting for him, and the two swung to saddle, crossing the shallow ford below and continuing down the valley along the main road.

"Smells to high heaven," Allison said. "But I don't see an opening to bring the issue into daylight. To make a move otherwise, will simply give warning and start them covering up the loopholes and cracks."

Some two hours later Donovan and the marshal turned aside toward the grove of liveoaks at the old Alcorta *rancho*. Flood had left several men here to look after the property, and had already brought in cattle from the south. The stock showed brands of eight or ten old Californian irons, a few vented by actual sale, others crudely worked over with running-irons. One of Flood's riders crossed toward them as they rode through the stock. The man was sullen and hard-faced, one of the crew Donovan remembered. He was sitting a Barra Cruz horse.

"There's brands among that herd from a hundred miles southward, and no buyer would need to be a cattleman to know what he was getting," Allison said, as they moved on. "Flood's dealt with some band of stock thieves for the cattle, buying cheap. It's all part of the general set-up. The records I looked at this morning show Flood acquired the Alcorta land by the orderly course of tax sale. Those records are probably forged. No actual cash left Flood's hands in the manipulation. But it would be a difficult thing to prove. And there's no way to bring charges for Alcorta's death, since it would be claimed he resisted legally appointed authorities. But walking into the Pay Streak yesterday to avenge his father's death, your friend Ramón is guilty of murder and if caught will be hung."

The marshal shook his head. "Somehow order's got to be established from such chaos. Take this situation; take a man like Ramón Alcorta, proud, fiery, the ties and blood-bonds of a hundred years of California *rancheros* in this valley behind him. I understand he got away clean on the fast horse he was riding yesterday. Men from the camp followed down to the Garcia *rancho* where it was known Ramón and his sister had been staying the past day or two. Both had flown. What's Ramón going to do now? What can he do against such injustice?"

"I'll tell you," Kurt Allison continued. "I can tell you what's happened before, what will happen again. Sooner or later Ramón will turn outlaw; there's no other trail open to him. Then he'll have to be hunted down, the same way this Three-Fingered José and the gangs plundering these foothill trails must be exterminated. There isn't any other way.

"Once the trail thieves have been wiped out, a camp like Hangtown Gulch will probably get around to cleaning up its own precincts. There have been some violent days in the past; there will be some more before it's finished. The camp, the country, the men in it have got to do that job if anything permanent is going to be gained by it. One U. S. Marshal and a handful of deputies in the middle of a section the size of this are powerless to accomplish any lasting change without backing of a majority behind them."

THEY rode on across the Alcorta lands, breasting the hills southward. As Allison expressed it, he wanted to get the lay of the country roughly in mind; it was impossible to do more. They faced tumbled ridges, rising for miles toward the higher mountains, the lower canyon courses often open with alders, sycamore and liveoaks crowded along the creeks, the slopes heavy with chaparral and occasional digger pines in the higher creases—a tangle of brush and rock and draws.

Far off, the Sierra lifted massive, craggy backbones and mighty forested shoulders against the sky. Across this sweep of land ran a hundred hazy trails, a thousand hidden draws, where there was feed and water for hard-ridden animals and shelter for fugitive riders, lay in its depths. They circled back, climbing a long top swell through the brush.

"Here's another angle of the situation that must be faced," the marshal said. "Given a troop of cavalry, I couldn't ride into this country and clean out the stock thieves, bandits and trail robbers hidden in its depths. It's too big. Yet in the end that's a thing that must be accomplished, one way or another. And what we see before us is only a small section of the whole."

The afternoon faded as they rode, and it was dusk when they cut back into the main road below Hangtown Gulch. The two were silent now. Donovan's own career had been checkered through the years since that sixteen-year-old boy in tattered buckskins had followed the slow, halting march of the imigrant wagons.

For a while he had worked in the old gold camps along the American. Then he had ridden for various stockmen along the San Joaquin plains. He had put the working months of one winter into a sawmill that he bought with a chance friend. The mill and lumber cut had caught fire and burned the following spring, and he had turned cowhand again. Kurt Allison had watched him in a shooting match along the river front at Bradford Landing, four months ago, and after it was finished they had talked a while.

"I think I could use a man like you if you want to come along with me," Allison had said. And Donovan had followed him into the upper Sacramento country, learning there the caliber of the man.

The evening stage had pulled into Hangtown Gulch ahead of them. They put their horses into the stage yards, continuing along the street afoot. Since morning the whole camp seemed to have learned of U. S. Marshal Allison's presence here. Men hailed him by name from the walks or nodded as they passed. Then just beyond Jack Russell's gambling house, a wiry, weather-burned stranger in store clothes and high-heeled boots caught up with them.

"Just pulled in on the stage. Been inquirin' everywhere along street for you, Kurt," the man said. "It's that old trouble up river. The pressure hydraulics they got in there and the flood wash of silt onto farm lands below. The local sheriff's got cold feet and quit. There's goin' to be a mass fight between settlers and minin' men unless somethin's done to stop it. It may have already happened. I dunno. But I come in for you from Bradford Landing as fast as possible."

U. S. Marshal Allison said, "I been more than half expectin' that." He shook hands. "All right, Ed. You go back to the stage yards and get a couple of fresh horses ready for us. I'm on my way up to the Esperanza Placer now. Grab yourself a bite to eat, and meet me up there with the mounts."

IN the light that came from a swung kerosene globe over the door of Jack Russell's place, Allison looked at Donovan. "There's nothing else to do," he said. "You know what that situation is up there. I've got to go! It may keep me a week or a month. I'm leavin' you here with a deputy marshal's badge, Donovan."

Donovan did not speak. They walked on. Claims had been staked all along the creekbed here. Campfires glowed out of the night as they passed; there was the odor of sizzling bacon and food being cooked. Miners in boots and muddy clothing, as they had quit their sluices and rockers, stood about the fires or called back and forth to neighbors.

Then as the two neared the forks of the gulch above, Allison striding quickly, some new commotion rose ahead. Voices lifted. Two miners, running heavily, stumbled into a fire-lit circle where others sat.

"Dave Calhoun's been killed!" one of the men panted. "We just found his body at that claim of his up the left fork. Dave had sent down word this mornin' that he'd struck a pocket. So we was goin' up to see what it amounted to. We found him lyin' there beside his sluice box, the back of his head half blowed off. Robbed of whatever he had. On that upper claim he was a quarter-mile from any neighbor. We'd warned him—" The miner's panting voice trailed off.

Marshal Allison stopped in the light of the fire. He stood a moment silent, then turned to Donovan, extending a hand. "Here's that deputy marshal's badge I'm leaving you. I'll go on up to the Esperanza; want to see Ratch again before I leave. I'll fill out appointment papers later. Do the best you can." He started on. "Be mighty sure of your ground before you step too far. That's all. Luck to you, Donovan!"

IV

WORD spread like wildfire from camp to camp along the floor of the gulch here. Within a few moments twenty or thirty miners crowded about the fire at the forks. Newcomers arrived momentarily. Torches and lanterns were lighted.

The crowd had become a mob now with an ominous, muttered undertone of voices. Moved without command, the force started up the far fork of the creek toward the lonely claim where a man had been murdered in cold blood for his gold sack. All the time others caught up and fell in at the rear.

Townsmen were among the latest comers, and before the murdered man's claim was reached two riders pushed horses through the group. Flickering flares and lantern light showed the stiff, expressionless face of Legs Anson, newly appointed sheriff, with one of the Bowie Flood gamblers riding at his side.

The dead man lay slumped down beside his sluice box, arms twisted under him. Anson took command as he swung from saddle, turning the body over. Lanterns pressed around; there was sudden silence. Then a hoarse voice exclaimed, "What's that? What's that *marked on his shirt?*"

It was a crude design drawn with the dead man's own blood on his shirt—a bar and cross. Among the others standing there, Donovan looked down and saw it. His hands closed tight, finger nails digging into the flesh of his palms. Nobody said anything more. A moment passed. Men beside him breathed with an audible sound, a heavy rasp of air drawn into lungs, held, and as slowly exhaled.

"Ain't that the same brand mark we seen on horses and some cattle in this neighborhood?" a muttered voice asked at last. "Called the Barra Cruz. Warn't it that young Alcorta what shot Sam Hooker yesterday in Flood's saloon? I know that brand. I reckon it means he did this—left that mark, wantin' us all to know he's after vengeance. Wherever he can find it now! On the trails or a lonesome claim like this—"

Legs Anson said, "I reckon that's just what it means. Some of you men tear off a side board of that sluice so we can pack Calhoun's body down to camp. Give him a decent burial. Let me have one of them lanterns now. I want to look around up-trail for track."

The sound of the crowd was a throaty, suppressed growl, the mingling of many voices all of the same fiber, all at once now. Hands tore the sluice box apart with a ripping violence that had no other outlet. Donovan followed the lantern that Legs and the Bowie Flood gambler carried away. At a distance he heard Legs say to the other man, "You slap a claim notice on this ground pronto, Searles. Calhoun claimed to have struck rich pocket ground."

The mutter of the crowd increased. Legs saw Donovan's features come into the dull circle of the lantern. He paused. His lips drew thin against his teeth. He watched Donovan's hands.

"I see you're wearin' that pair of silver guns, Señor Donovan," he said with a mocking grin.

"That's right. What d'you make of the track?"

"One man come down the trail here and did the job, and rode back the same way. The rest'll have to wait for daylight. I just heard rumor at the stage yards that this U. S. Marshal friend of yours was leavin' town tonight. He should have waited."

DONOVAN turned and walked back down-trail. Half an hour later he climbed the other fork of the gulch to the Esperanza claims.

The Esperanza was the only placer working a regular night shift. Under the ruddy flares of torches and burning pine fires men stooped, shoveled, straightened, throwing gravel into the trough-like sluices. There was the sound of rushing water over riffle cleats, the steady shift of tailings from the boxes. Usually the voices of laborers rose above this rumbled undertone of the sluices, clank of tools on rock and churning water; but tonight the men were silent.

Clem Ratch and Billy Cracken sat alone in the shed-like office room. Kurt Allison had already left. There were deep-sunk lines about Ratch's mouth under the room lamp.

"What's this about a murder up on the other fork?" he asked.

"A man named Dave Calhoun," Donovan told him. He paced the length of the room. "Calhoun had struck a pocket; he'd evidently just finished cleaning out his sluice. Whoever murdered him was standin' no more than an arm's length distant when the shot was fired." Again Donovan paced the room. "There was a mark drawn on his shirt with blood. A bar and cross—"

"The Barra Cruz!" Ratch's words stopped in his throat. No one spoke for the length of a moment. Then Ratch continued softly, "What're you going to do? Allison mentioned the fact that he's left you here with a deputy marshal's authority."

"I intend to be up there, followin' that track tomorrow daylight." The words came slowly, forced between Donovan's teeth. "What else is there to do, Ratch?"

Ratch shook muscular shoulders. He moved heavily across to a battered desk that stood amid the clutter at the end of the room. He turned, and said, "I don't believe it! That shootin' in the Pay Streak —yes, that was a different matter. I don't believe the same man that walked in there, with fifty-to-one odds against him, did a sneak-thief murder like this other. You don't believe it either, Donovan.

"I'd intended to clean up the Esperanza sluices tomorrow mornin'. We've got eight days' run of gravel over the riffles right now, as rich dirt as the Esperanza's ever shoveled out. It's too much raw gold lyin' loose under the cleats of them boxes, but it'll have to wait. Somethin's goin' to break wide open in Hangtown Gulch, Donovan!"

BEFORE daylight, Ratch mounted beside Donovan at the stage yards where the horses were kept. All saloons along the gulch street had been open that night. Miners packed the streets from every claim and digging along the creek. There was a surge and swell of noise that grew continually heavier. Rifle barrels and weapons carried in hand caught the light from the saloon fronts, glinted. Most of the force at the Esperanza sluices had quit before midnight and joined the mob in town. Ratch had left two men on guard.

Donovan saw Legs Anson, erect and stiff in his saddle, shoving a big bay horse along the street, followed by six or eight mounted men. A bellowed voice lifted, drawing the drift of miners toward the far end of the street where the milling pack of the crowd filled the space between the building fronts. The mob began to move up-creek. Jack Russell, the gambler, swung to saddle, and Billy Cracken led the way from the stage corral around behind buildings till they cleared the far end of the street ahead.

The crowd was following as they rode up the trail the short distance back to the forks and climbed toward the claim where Calhoun had been killed. There was still not enough light for trailing. Dawn was only a vague rim of gray over the Sierra hills.

"What this mob afoot figures it can do, I don't know," Ratch muttered. "But all hell's goin' to break loose under this camp if it gets its teeth in anything."

Others were ahead or had waited all night at Calhoun's claim. A big fire burned in the clearing above his diggings. Shortly Legs Anson and the riders with him arrived with the leaders of the crowd afoot, and the clearing filled. The gray line of dawn crept higher.

Without exception the riders with Anson were Flood men. Two of them Donovan recognized from that morning at the Alcorta house. All the ground about the

clearing was littered with the mark of many heavy boots and heels, and during the night a score of men had attempted to follow the murderer's track up-trail for a couple of miles. Anson stopped and questioned a rawboned miner at the fire.

"Sure, the track was plain up to the ridge brush," the man answered. "But we couldn't do no more with lanterns. You won't have no trouble findin' the spot I mean."

Anson said, "All right. Let's get up there while we're waitin' for daylight."

Anson and the riders at his side moved off. The crowd was reluctant to stand here, and a few began following up the trail after Donovan and the three with him passed. More fell in behind. Dawn spread a strong flood of light across the ridge above by the time the horsemen reached the crest, and here the track where the murderer's horse had cut off into the chaparral was plain. The trail behind was trampled with boots.

"You lettin' Anson take the lead?" Ratch asked.

"We're havin' a look-see along with him," Donovan said. "There's a whole lot more about this that I don't savvy. I'm anxious to see just how Anson intends to handle it, and just what result he expects to get with this crowd hangin' on his heels. The man ahead has a night's lead and is ridin'. This looks like a grandstand play. I want to see."

Through the chaparral the hooves of the murderer's mount left a broken trail, sometimes plainly visible, again lost for a distance. Riders worked down the next slope, climbed once more. For an hour there was steady riding while the sun rose and climbed in the sky. Then there was trouble finding the trail among canyon rocks.

The early morning passed. A higher ridge beyond was finally crossed, and for a brief space the track was plain across an eroded open slope. It led down once into brush and rocks, where the man they tracked doubled, and riders circled for an hour without learning how he had gone out. By now the crowd afoot had caught up again.

Billy Cracken was riding at Donovan's side. "So what?" he asked.

"So this is about as far as we go in this direction," Donovan said. "I'm turnin' back. There's another idea in my mind."

"You wantin' any company?"

"No. We don't all want to draw out. But tell Ratch. My hunch says you'll all be back in camp before late afternoon. I'm headin' around the other way as soon as a chance comes. There's two ways of trailin' a man."

AN hour and a half later Donovan searched the side trail brush above the clearing where Calhoun had been shot. He worked along the steep hill slope, leading his mount. The sun rose higher with a hot, noontime warmth. He crossed the trampled bottom trail presently, and began climbing back along the opposite side of the slope, still keeping deep in the brush. Here, within a quarter-mile, he found the sign of what he sought—the plain track of the murderer's animal before the man had ridden down to Calhoun's diggings and accomplished the deed.

The killer had stopped in a little opening of the brush and waited for a time, looking down on the clearing where Calhoun worked beside his sluice. From this point he had pushed across into the main trail and headed down. The man's back-trail leading this far was plain, untouched.

Back-tracking, it led across slope toward the Esperanza fork of the gulch, always keeping in cover, and circled the Esperanza shacks and sluices a mile distant, lining around toward the town beyond. Some time yesterday afternoon, Donovan realized, the killer had come from the vicinity of Hangtown Gulch, circling wide to avoid the bottom claims and workers. Then close enough to hear distant noises from the camp town, he found where the man had waited for some long time in a thick clump of madroña up the steep hill slope.

The killer had dismounted here, perhaps two or three hours before the killing, smoked several cigarettes and presently met a rider who came up from the town. The other had not left his saddle. His horse had fretted while they talked. Then the man had turned and headed back into the town; and the killer had continued his own ride around through the distant brush to strike Calhoun, who had dug into a rich pocket that morning.

Donovan's lips formed soundless words: "He either got some straight tip-off, or he got orders here!"

There was no way of trailing the rider who had come up from the town, once hooves mixed with the hoof-prints along the street below. But the killer's back-trail led on up a thicketed ravine from the madroña clump, crossed the head of slope above and continued off into that stretch of broken foothills, canyon bottom and maze of brush-thick ridges which Allison and Donovan had briefly penetrated yesterday.

The sun was dropping westward now. For a time Donovan lost the sign in bushy going. He picked it up beyond, knowing this man had come from some camp in the deep hills where it was likely he would return again.

Finally the back-track swung into a well-defined trail, cutting to the westward. He followed this warily. The crest of a ridge rose, a wide slope reached before him. Against the sun, his eyes picked out a thread of dust that climbed above the lower brush two or three miles distant.

He stopped. For half an hour he watched the occasional, hazy-thin dust stringers which betrayed a band of eight or ten horsemen working across country toward the Hangtown road. The dust moved up the low end of the ridge where Donovan sat, still at a distance, and dropped away beyond.

He cut into thick brush, working off that way to the right. The rising slopes blotted out his view. Then he crossed track, and just before sundown counted nine riders filing across the edge of a little canyon clearing, close enough to distinguish figures and wide sombreros. This was no part of that mounted posse or the many miners who had been scouring the country north that morning.

The light began to fade. The band of riders had changed direction, following the rough side hills toward the camp town itself.

Donovan turned aside, pushed his horse across stony bottoms and climbed once more. He cursed his lack of intimate knowledge of this country. What was happening now, what that meeting of the killer he had back-trailed and some man from the camp meant, he did not know. But somewhere straight ahead, the way he traveled, he was bound to strike the Hangtown road.

HE had ridden a mile or two, spurring through the brush. His mount turned down some wide ravine, and he could make nothing of the dark surrounding jumble of the hills. Then in one breath his nostrils caught the pungent odor of wood smoke. He stopped his horse, and immediately heard the soft nicker of some tethered animal close at hand.

In the vague half-light that filtered through the shielding trees, he could make out the general outline of a clearing beyond, and a little shack set against the brush. The shack showed a crack of flickering firelight from within.

His eyes studied the tethered animal that was pulling at the end of a rawhide *reata,* and beyond any doubt, that instant, Donovan recognized the big leggy *palomino* horse. Even in this dim light, he knew certainly that he had found that same big silver-maned animal that had carried Ramón Alcorta out of Hangtown Gulch, following the shooting which had killed Sheriff Hooker.

He did not move. Here he had reached the end of some uncertain trail, no matter how he had found it. He braced himself as though to meet a physical blow; and in the end, with slow, dragging steps he crossed the space of clearing toward the shack. A sagged door stood ajar around corner. He put one shoulder against it and went in, arms hanging loose.

There was a quick, startled cry. Between the door and the flicker of an open blaze that burned in a cracked old fireplace, a figure whirled. A white hand flashed toward a broken, heavy table that stood in the middle of the room, and the slim figure of Dolores Alcorta stood backed against one wall of the shack with a gun in her hand. Donovan stopped like a man hit on the jaw. He could see the play of firelight across her delicate, even features, and the wide dark depths of her eyes.

He heard her say, "What—what are you doing here? The Garcias—no one would have told you where I was."

"Where is Ramón?" he asked at last, tonelessly. "A man was murdered last

night up on the far fork of the gulch. There was a bar and cross drawn on his shirt with blood."

"Ramón?" she repeated after him. She shook her head. "Ramón is dead. You should have known or guessed. Men from the gulch followed him down toward the Garcia *rancho* that night. He was already mortally wounded then. But somehow he managed to cling to his saddle and I brought him here. I nursed him as best I could. Here was shelter for a while, but he died before dawn. Ramón is buried on the edge of the clearing here. I—" Her voice faltered, broke.

He stood and stared at her, the picture of the past that came so often to his mind flooding back. The old Alcorta place as he had first seen it, the *fiesta* gathered there under the great liveoaks, and men riding out to welcome that halting file of tattered wagons, the boy Ramón racing ahead. And now this daughter of the old house stood before him like a fugitive in a hidden shack among the hills, Don Santiago gone, and her brother buried under the weed-choked sod of the unnamed clearing's edge.

"No, I didn't think it was Ramón," he said.

His mind was filled with thoughts he could not express. He walked toward her slowly. And then, without knowing how it happened, he was holding her tight in his arms while the pent-up strain and emotion gave way and she sobbed against him as though her heart would break. She whispered finally, "I didn't know what to do, or where to go. The Garcias are poor people. Too much trouble has already been brought on them—"

Too much injustice, killing and murder had been pressed on this whole country. Donovan was suddenly remembering that back-trail he had followed through the hills, the meeting of the murderer yesterday with some man from the town below, and that stealthy march of other riders through the brush toward Hangtown Gulch.

"We've got to leave here immediately," he told her. "You'll be safe at the Esperanza Placer tonight. Later, Dolores—later there is something I want to ask you. Now I've got to talk to Clem Ratch as soon as I can find him."

V

THE girl mounted on that leggy *palomino* that had been Ramón's, they crossed a swell of the hills and struck the Hangtown road sooner than Donovan had expected.

At the shallow ford below the gulch town, Donovan led aside. From here the voice of the camp was audible, and he knew that the miners were back. The same violent pack of men filled the street again, moving from bar to bar with a thwarted, aimless surging, while the claims up-creek stood deserted. Donovan turned and climbed halfway up the side-slope, passing the camp at a distance, and struck on along the hill to cross and drop into the right-hand fork of the gulch at the Esperanza, thus avoiding the main creek-bottom trail.

The *palomino* followed close behind Donovan's mount. They came down through brush, and in the dim starlight Donovan could trace the rough course of the side gulch below. Then he caught sight of a flare and the dull illumination of work fires at the placer. Ratch had evidently got a night shift back on the job at the sluices. A window light burned bright in the office shack. The undergrowth thickened, and finally Donovan dismounted to lead his horse.

He had reached a point hardly ten yards distant from the edge of the huge gravel hole cut out here before he realized that tonight there was none of the usual noisy clank of shovels and the rush of water through the sluices.

Hunched over the sluice boxes, six or seven men worked silently, cleaning the heavy accumulation of dust and nugget gold from the bottom riffles into sacks. Donovan remembered that Ratch had mentioned the fact that a clean-up of the boxes was overdue. He had said that too much raw gold was lying loose there in the bottoms of the sluices. Two visible figures stood on guard with rifles.

He walked on a few paces. Some warning he could not have defined stopped him. Immediately he was aware of two things at once. A man was lying along the edge of open bank before him, a dark, doubled figure on the ground. And somewhere off on the other hand, a horse

stamped in the brush and another animal shifted with a small creak of saddle leather and the scrape of brush on gear. A knot of eight or ten horses had been tied there in the brush. He waited utterly motionless. Behind him the *palomino* stopped and nosed his horse. In a second Dolores' voice asked a low, anxious question.

He moved his head far enough around to mutter audibly, "Don't move now! But when I give the word, turn and get your horse out of here and don't let anything stop you."

That doubled figure on the edge of the bank before him was Clem Ratch. He recognized the strong frame and muscular shoulders of the mining-man beyond any mistake. One of the men beside the sluices turned, staring this way with a rifle cradled in his arms. In the dull glow of flare and fire by which the sluices were being cleaned out, Donovan saw that the rifleman was masked to the bridge of his nose.

Then one of Clem Ratch's hands moved, working slowly and painfully along the ground, to lift his hurt weight a few inches and drag himself that much farther toward the brush. The man with the rifle said something in Spanish.

Donovan dropped, and in what shadow lay along the bank crawled across to Ratch. Ratch's head was turned. He was breathing with a heavy effort, trying to make another pull toward the brush. "You, Donovan?" he asked in a rasping, low whisper. "Lissen! There's a rifle just yonder. I was climbin' the bank here to use it when one of 'em dropped on me from behind with a knife. We rolled back. The gun fell and he never found it. . . ."

"All right! Hang onto my belt, Ratch, while I pull you into cover."

"Get the rifle," Ratch whispered. "That's all I want. They had Billy before he could reach a gun. I was tryin' to make the bank where I'd have a chance. Gunfire will rouse the town below. One of them masked men is Legs Anson!"

THE rifleman standing by the sluices whistled shrilly. From somewhere farther down the gulch there was an answer. Two men left the sluices. Donovan had dragged Ratch a yard or two back from the edge of the bank. There was a scream behind, and everything that happened now came with a rush and impact that staggered any ordered sequence in his brain.

Like a cat, a man came through the brush edge, leaping before Donovan could gain his feet. It was like that other fight on the trail. As he drove and struck upward with a lifted fist and shoulders, he knew he yelled to the girl who had given him this warning—

"Ride! Get out of here!"

The weight of the man's lunge toppled him. As they went over, a knife cut deep into Donovan's thigh. Somehow in that instant his hands both caught the other's throat. Rolling, he threw him bodily with that grip across the bank. He heard shrill orders, oaths, in Spanish. But there was no crackle of brush stems and hoofs as Dolores turned and rode. He climbed to his knees, dragging the silver guns free.

From twenty paces distant in the placer ground, a dark ragged figure threw a knife that glittered like a streak of starlight and struck the stems of brush behind him. The man tossed over the bank crawled and ran. A deep-bellowed voice yelled something in English.

Before Donovan's own right gun exploded, a masked figure ran across beside the sluices, hands reaching toward hips, and shots cut a high, rising echo through the gulch. Once witnessing this gunman's skill, at any time thereafter or under any other circumstance, Donovan thought he could have identified the man. He drove his second shot toward that lithe figure, while a rifleman on the other hand opened and lead spattered dust from the bank edge against his knees.

Ratch had rolled and crawled on, the last ounce of wounded strength in the man concentrated on reaching that rifle dropped somewhere along the bank here. Four or five guns were in it now; a roar of sound blasted through the gulch and went rumbling and re-echoing off into the hills.

Legs had turned a little sidewise, and his mask was evidently bothering him. He tore it from his features with one savage gun hand. He lurched slightly, caught at the side of the sluice box, but did not drop either gun. He settled solidly on both feet as Donovan fired his fourth shot of the battle, and one end of the sluice trough now protected his middle.

The tug of a bullet stirred the air

against the side of Donovan's cheek. The next shot tore under his left arm and a sudden, fire-hot streak of pain cut across his ribs. He had seen Legs shoot like this before.

He had used one gun now and dropped it, shifting the left into his right hand. Then Donovan heard the high crack of a rifle at his side in Clem Rath's hands. He shouted words that went unheard. Whether Ratch had finally found the gun in these seconds or Dolores Alcorta had discovered it underfoot, he never knew. In the blast of this action, he only realized that she had not ridden out as he had ordered, but crouched there beside Ratch. Ratch could not support himself unaided. He saw the girl eject the empty shell from the barrel, and Ratch's head drop forward against the stock, lining sights once more.

FOUR or five running figures had crossed the uneven space of placer ground, dodging behind sluices and the piled stacks of tailing boulders, to gain cover along the far bank edge. They left one man, who dropped on hands and knees, his head jerking with the fits of coughing that racked his frame. A rifle had started cutting from behind one of the tailing stacks in the middle ground. Then the gun in Donovan's hand was suddenly done. Anson was briefly invisible behind the sluice, and whether he had fallen there or only dropped into cover while reloading was not plain. Donovan plugged cartridges into his cylinder with numb fingers that slipped on the shells from his belt. His left hand was wet with blood.

The running figures that had reached the far bank edge would be circling around through the brush. Ratch's rifle spoke once more, and now there was a crash of fire from the bank brush shadow. Legs Anson drove into sight again, and some mad fury took hold of the man or an utter recklessness brought him walking with weaving steps across floor of the placer hole.

Donovan jammed a last shell into the cylinder of Don Alcorta's silver .44 as both Anson's guns started at once. He heard the smash of brush stems close at hand and was conscious of a dark, rushing figure breaking through that edge brush at him, while he steadied and shot once at Anson . . . Twice. He saw Anson falter.

He fired a third shot blindly. It missed. There was a flash of muzzle flame that licked across his face at no more distance than arm's reach. He turned and slugged the outlaw and somehow got a thumb on the hammer and fired again. There was the blast of Ratch's rifle close by. The man he grappled with went down against Donovan's legs with a jolt that threw him. A claw hand reached out. The hand had two fingers missing so that it looked like a three-tined hook in the dim flicker of firelight. The man's arm sagged, his whole body collapsed.

Dolores was standing back with the rifle at her own shoulder. Another figure turned aside through the bank edge brush. There was a yell in Spanish. Riders reached the knot of horses tied in the brush. Hooves pounded out. Across the placer hole, the rifle estanched behind a stack of tailing boulders still continued. But the guns Anson held were silent.

Faltering, Anson's knees had buckled. The man fell forward on his hands. He was still trying to raise a gun without strength to accomplish it. He slipped slowly. Then his muscles went slack all at once and he sprawled on into one of the shallow gravel holes, the life gone out of him.

Ratch was whispering, "Get another shell into that rifle, girl . . . !"

VI

TEN minutes later voices and the sound of running boots came up the gulch bottom, and the first score or more of miners crossed into the light of dying fires where the Esperanza sluices had been plundered. From moment to moment their number grew till the clearing was jammed. Without words these men understood the meaning of looted boxes and scraped riffles, the sign of a half-completed clean-up at the sluices, and battle on this ground.

Voices rose to a heavy rumbled mutter. The rifleman who had been firing behind the stack of tailings was found with an empty gun, and a bullet-shattered leg which had kept him from crawling off. For the past four or five months the camp

had known this man by the name of Searles—one of the hangers-on about the Pay Streak who did odd jobs for Flood and occasionally dealt at one of the gaming tables.

"It was Searles that filed claim on Calhoun's diggin's in Flood's name, wasn't it?" a deep-chested miner asked. "Before we could carry Calhoun's body down to camp last night."

Clem Ratch was carried into the office room shack and laid on a cot where he usually slept. Ratch breathed thickly. A knife had gone deep between his shoulders, but the bleeding had stopped. Some voice suggested that a stage be harnessed tonight and sent out over the road to Bradford Landing, to bring a doctor back! The stageyard manager, an old friend of Ratch's, agreed readily.

Donovan stood in the light of the door behind, neither of the two wounds he had received serious enough to keep him off his feet. In fact, he rode later for two days and a night without rest. He still wore the silver-mounted guns of Don Alcorta.

The throaty voice of the crowd about the placer clearing deepened. Legs Anson had been lifted into the light of one of the nearby fires. Word passed swiftly from ear to ear. Three-Fingered José had been identified by the men who had carried Ratch across from the edge bank, and another dark-skinned trail thief with a rifle lay there under the sluices.

It took no further information to understand what kind of a connection had existed between the organized representatives of law and government in the camp town and the wild band of trail cutthroats, the *ladrónes,* that had followed a Mexican halfbreed called Three-Fingered José.

The two factions had worked together in this sluice robbery at the Esperanza Placer. Much more could be accounted for by this connection. Donovan knew that the trail thief who had killed Calhoun had had a meeting with Flood or Legs Anson on the slope above town. He knew the blood mark on Calhoun's shirt had been a ruse, thought out in advance in the Pay Streak, to stamp suspicion on Ramón. It had gone too far. Records, papers, the whole corrupt situation later came to light in detail, when Allison returned and began a methodical sifting of the evidence.

But now the movement of the crowd was back toward Hangtown.

Halfway down the camp street, leaders sighted a mount standing in front of the 'dobe-walled building that served as jail, town hall and county office. There was still no sound except the muffled tramp of boots. Bowie Flood's solid, square-set figure ran from the door of the building with a sheaf of loose papers stuffed under one arm. He hit saddle. He turned, looked back, and put spurs to his horse.

In mid-street, across from the lights of his own saloon, suddenly twenty guns opened on Flood. The animal under him collapsed in a heap. A deep rumble of sound rose against the hills, volleyed from slope to slope. It was the shout of an angry, justice-awakened crowd.

Donovan's head came up. He halted.

I believe I could guess what that means, he thought. The camp's alive, awake to the fact that what is one man's good or harm affects another; all of them. Tonight Hangtown Gulch has become a different community.

He walked beside Dolores Alcorta in the starlit shadow of the gulch, watching the pale oval of her face, thinking of many things. His future lay in this new far westward land, beyond the Sierra summits that that sixteen-year-old boy had crossed beside a halting file of wagons. His shoulder touched the shoulder of this daughter of the old *rancho* as they walked. He remembered how once tonight she had been in his arms, remembered the softness of her hair against his hard, brown-burned face. But what he wished to ask her was strangely hard.

"What kind of records they'll find, or in what shape, I don't know. But there isn't any question, the *hacienda* and land will come back to you. Later, Dolores—" he said. He wasn't getting anywhere with words. "After that's happened, there's something I want to ask you—"

"You said that once before tonight. Are you always going to wait to ask it?"

"No. No—" he said. And he had his answer then, as she turned toward him. But now her head was lifted, and her lips met his.

THE BOOTHILL MESSENGER

By CHARLES WINFIELD FESSIER

It was plumb disgustin' the way hard luck hounded that Barstow Kid. Ever' time his iron cleared leather, he blasted away a job, a pardner, or an ace-high range queen.

THE Barstow Kid was whistling as he rode along, enjoying the cool wind that was toying with the evening dust of the trail.

In the distance there was a drumming sound. A cloud of dust rolled up from speeding hoofs and a horseman came into view, leaning forward in the saddle and

applying the quirt. He was going somewhere fast.

"That'd be Jimmy Bradford," mused the Barstow Kid. "Allus in a hurry and never going any place in particular. When they bury that hombre they'll need a racehorse to pull the hearse."

The Kid's lean frame was slouched in the saddle but one who knew him would have seen that he was poised for action as the other rider drew closer. The Kid's eyes were narrowed and his hand dropped six inches closer to the holster of his revolver.

Jimmy Bradford, small, black-eyed, hawk-beaked and as active as a sparrow, drew rein and his mount came to a stiff-legged halt.

"Hello, old-timer," drawled the Barstow Kid.

"I been looking for you," snapped Jimmy, his beady eyes snapping.

"Figgered so," said the Kid.

"You killed Bill, my brother," accused Jimmy.

"Shore did," admitted the Barstow Kid calmly. "Yore brother plumb invited killing. He drew first but he thought more of speed than he did straight shooting, so I saved him the trouble of wasting a second shot."

"I'm gonna kill you," stated Jimmy.

"Figgered you'd try," said the Kid.

"It ain't that you didn't do it fair," explained Jimmy. "You give Bill a fair chance and I guess he had it coming to him. Sometimes when he got drunk I figgered I'd have to shoot him myself. Plumb no good for nothing was Bill. Wouldn't work nor do nothing but drink and pick fights. But he was my brother and I gotta kill you."

"Yeah," said the Kid, "I know how you feel."

"Sure," stated Jimmy. "A fella's gotta get even for his brother being killed, even if said brother wasn't no good for a hoot in hell. It's one of them things that gotta be done. So I'm gonna kill you."

"If you can," the Kid corrected him.

"If I can," admitted Jimmy.

"Ain't you gonna draw?" asked the Kid after what he considered a polite interval.

"Not now," said Jimmy. "Like a plumb jackass I lost my six in a poker game."

"Then I guess we don't settle this thing now," ventured the Kid.

"Nope," answered Jimmy. "Next time. Have your shooting clothes on the next time we meet, 'cause I shore will. I'm on my way to get a new gun now."

"I'll be ready," the Kid agreed. "So long."

"So long," answered Jimmy and spurred his horse forward, riding swiftly into the gathering gloom of night.

The Kid lighted a cigarette and his horse ambled leisurely forward.

"Good fella, Jimmy," mused the Kid. "Too bad his brother was such a measly coyote."

WITH which casual remark the Kid dismissed the entire matter from his thoughts. Not that he forgot it—the thing would always be in the background of his mind—but the Kid didn't fight his gun battles until the time came. In the meanwhile he kept his mind free from worry. He realized that sooner or later he'd meet Jimmy Bradford; that there'd be a brief exchange of thoughts and one of them would have no further use for his saddle. . . .

The Kid's was a simple code and he lived up to it. It was the code of the range. Jimmy, too, respected it. Otherwise Jimmy would not have signified his intention of killing the Kid. Although it was senseless and unreasonable, the code required that a man avenge his brother's death or be classed as a coward. The Kid felt no animosity whatsoever toward Jimmy, and Jimmy felt none toward the Kid, and yet when they next met there would have to be gunfire. It was the code.

Having it in his mind to pay a visit to the Bar-Z ranch, a few miles on, the Barstow Kid rode unhurriedly forward. It was part of his code never to exhaust his mount, thus keeping the animal in condition to produce speed when speed was needed. Such emergencies had often arisen in the Kid's life, and his practice of conserving the energy of his horse had saved him more than once.

About halfway to his destination the Kid sighted a small fire off the trail in a clump of sagebrush.

"May be some of the boys," he muttered and guided his horse toward the blaze. Then he drew rein and listened.

From the opposite direction came hoof-

beats. Two figures arose from the fire and peered into the darkness, their hands gripping their holsters.

"None of the Bar-Z boys," decided the Kid. "They wouldn't be afraid of a stranger thataway."

THE white face of a horse split the darkness and a woman rode into the wavering circle of light thrown by the fire. Although her features were indistinct, the Kid could see that she was young, attractive, and that she sat her mount as does one born to the saddle.

"Can you tell me the way to the Bar-L ranch?" asked the girl in a soft, pleasant voice. "You see I haven't been on this range for years, and somehow I've forgotten the landmarks."

The larger of the two men walked closer and surveyed the girl closely before he answered.

"And so you're from the Bar-L?" he said. "Thought I saw a gal coming there yestaday. You a daughter of Old Zeke's?"

"No, I'm his niece," answered the girl impatiently. "I'm in a hurry. My uncle'll be worried. Won't you tell me how to get back?"

The smaller man joined his companion and stood with short bandy-legs wide apart as he glanced up at the girl.

"A niece," he muttered. "A niece? Whadda ya think a' that? A niece o' that old hornyhided billy-goat, Zeke Clemens."

The big man laughed drunkenly.

"And she's in a hurry," he said. "Wants us to set her right. And her uncle'll worry about her being out late. My, my!"

The girl did not show fear. Instead her head went up and she leaned back in the saddle. The Kid imagined he could see the fire glinting in her eyes.

"Listen, hombres," she snapped, "tell me what I want to know and tell me quick. Anything you have to say to my uncle, say it to his face; if you're men enough."

"Spunky and mean. Jest like her ole uncle," said the small man.

"Yeah," said the other. "Talks just like old Zeke did when he kicked us off'n the ranch today. Jest 'cause we was drunk. The old mangy-hided, yella-whiskered son of a sheep. Fired us, he did."

"I'll be going," snapped the girl. "There's no use wasting breath on you two rats. Take this warning, though. Hit the wind out of here before morning or you'll stay permanently."

As the girl wheeled the horse the big man leaped forward and caught the bridle.

"No you don't," he snapped. "Yo're staying a while with us. Yo're gonna stay and give that uncle of your'n plenty to worry about. Come off'n yore saddle and be sociable so's when we get through yore uncle'll be glad on account of he fired us today."

THE girl twisted free and reached for a saddle holster. The little man caught her wrist and wrested the weapon from her hand. Together the two men dragged the struggling girl off the horse. Her clothing was torn and her hair tumbled about her shoulders in wild disarray as she fought silently. Finally she was subdued. The big man thrust his face close to hers.

"Right nice of you to drop in on us," he said. "We'll try and repay your uncle's courtesy." He pursed his lips. "Come on," he said, "kiss me."

The girl jerked her hand free and struck out with fierce strength. The big man fell back cursing as he wiped the blood from his wounded mouth.

The Barstow Kid, who had been watching in fascination as the girl waged her splendidly courageous battle against odds, decided it was time for action. He spurred his pony forward. The mount leaped into the firelight and the Kid's revolver swept in a short arc as he covered the two men who stared in amazement and terror up at him.

"Put 'em up and hang on," snapped the Kid. Then, in a gentler voice to the girl, he said, "Get their guns, if you please, Miss."

The girl stepped forward and reached for the big man's revolver. As her hand touched the weapon, he grasped her with one powerful arm and pulled his six-shooter with the other. The Kid could not fire without running the risk of hitting the girl.

Quick to seize the advantage, the little man drew and fired from the hip. At the flash the Barstow Kid fell sideways off his mount. As he landed he writhed and fired between the legs of the pony. The small

man slumped forward, collapsing with his face within a foot of the fire.

The big man fired and the nervous pony, unable to withstand the unwonted noise, leaped forward, exposing his master to the fire of the enemy.

The big man fired again and the Kid felt a burning pain in his shoulder. He rolled over swiftly and gained the shelter of the surrounding brush. Then he began to crawl in a slow, cautious circle. Holding the half-fainting girl, the big man peered into the brush, striving to locate his quarry. The Kid, moving inch by inch, was still unable to fire for fear of hitting the girl; but he had a plan. Finally the weird game of hide-and-seek began to tell on the big man. He was obviously nervous as he circled, striving to find a target for his ready revolver.

The Kid hurled a stone into the brush. The big man whirled in the direction of the sound and fired. Running low, the Kid darted from the brush and struck, sending his man reeling with one hard-flung blow.

THE girl fell to the ground and scrambled to one side. The big man staggered back and blue steel glinted in the firelight as his gun swung around. The Kid's shot followed the big man's by a split second but his aim was truer. The big man's shot went wild and the Kid's ended the swift battle. His enemy slumped to the ground, blood coursing from a wound in his forehead.

The Kid was breathing hard as he faced the girl, but he managed to keep his voice calm.

"The trail to the Bar-L Ranch is over yonder," he said, waving his uninjured arm.

"Thanks," said the girl calmly. "My uncle'd sure laugh if he found out I got lost on the home range. You sure can use a six, stranger."

The Kid was appraising the girl. A thoroughbred, all right, he decided. No fainting nor hysterics for her. Game to the core. And wasn't she a picture standing there with her black hair half hiding her white face and with her torn clothing revealing expanses of firmly rounded pink flesh?

"Maybe," he said diffidently, "I'd better sort of escort you a piece. Can't tell but what yore uncle fired a couple more coyotes today."

"No, thanks," answered the girl as she arranged her hair, "I know the way now and I've learned enough not to ride into any more traps. Thanks a lot for the lift and—"

A sharp cry escaped her lips and she strode forward.

"You got hurt, cowboy," she said pointing to the Kid's crimson shoulder.

"Nothing much," denied the Kid. "Just a scratch. It'll be all right."

"That's what kills you fool punchers—scratches," stated the girl decisively. "You'll get blood poisoning or something and the range'll lose a darn' good hand. Get on your horse and come with me. I know what to do with scratches. In the saddle, cowboy."

There was something in the girl's voice that brooked no argument. The Kid climbed into the saddle and they started forward along the narrow trail leading through the sagebrush. As he rode along and felt the proximity of the girl, the Kid was conscious that he was glad he had that wound in the shoulder.

BY the time they'd reached the Bar-L the Kid was feeling queer. After he'd been thanked by tight-lipped old Zeke Clemens and had his wound dressed by the girl, he decided he knew what was the matter with him.

As he put it, the girl had him hog-tied and thrown across the saddle feeling as weak as a bawling sick calf.

Old Zeke left the room and the girl stood surveying her handiwork, her black hair glowing in the lamplight and her cheeks flushed.

"By the way, miss," said the Kid, "what's yore name?"

"It isn't miss," answered the girl. "It's Missus."

The Kid tried to remember just when it was that the black cat had crossed his path.

"Husband owned the Double-X in Sage county," the girl went on. "He got shot soon's we were married. Tried to make the ranch go for a couple of years and the last dry season licked me. I had to come back here with uncle. He calls me Helen."

"That's shore fine," said the Kid with undue enthusiasm.

"What?" asked the girl, smiling. "My husband getting killed, me losing the ranch or—"

"No," said the Kid, "I meant you being here. If you wasn't here I'd never met you and—"

"And you wouldn't have a hole in your shoulder," drawled the girl. "I'm going to bed. You go to sleep like a good cowboy."

THE next morning Old Zeke came in, his keen gray eyes studying the Kid intently as he spoke.

"Well, son," he said, "I've been thinking of expenses. I figger I'll have to feed you free until that nick of your'n heals. Why not sign up with me and get paid to boot? I'll get my money back by working hell outta you next round-up. We need young fellas as knows how to use guns these days. This yere Don Pedro's hiding out hereabouts and they's no telling when he'll get all hopped up on red-eye and come hunting trouble. He don't like me on account of I killed one of his men a month or two ago. Well, what you say?"

The Barstow Kid caught sight of Helen standing in the doorway and he grinned happily.

"You've hired my hoss, my six-gun, and me," he stated.

The Kid's wound healed remarkably fast. Old Zeke said it was a miracle that he didn't die. He declared that his niece bandaged the wound so often that the attention would have killed an ordinary man.

By the time he was in the saddle again, the Kid and Helen had an understanding. They didn't speak of it. They didn't have to. They rode for miles through the aromatic sage and wild grass and their glances did the talking. They both understood that the Barstow Kid had roamed his last; that he'd found an anchor for all time.

ONE day a lithe, black-eyed little cowpuncher rode to the Bar-L ranch, jumped his horse over the fence and leaped to the ground to catch Helen in his arms.

"Hullo, Sis," he cried happily. "Been trying to get over to see you for some time. But I couldn't. Been looking for a man."

Helen stepped back and surveyed her brother.

"And did you find him?" she asked.

"Nope," stated Jimmy Bradford, "but when I do I'll kill him. He shot Bill."

"Yes, I heard about Bill," said Helen slowly. "He—he was the same wasn't he?"

"Shore," admitted Jimmy readily. "He was the same as when he killed yore husband 'cause he wouldn't loan him any more money to get drunk on. He was a good-for-nothing, Sis, but he was my brother and I gotta—"

"He wasn't your brother and you don't have to do anything," interrupted Helen. "He was your half-brother and he was bound to get killed sooner or later. Don't you be foolish, Jimmy and—"

"You don't understand, Sis," said Jimmy patiently. "The fellas all expect me to do it and I have to. They'd think I was yella. Listen, hon—"

Jimmy stopped talking and his black eyes snapped as around the corner slouched the Barstow Kid.

Reaching for his gun and leaping away from his sister he called out, "Hi, there, Barstow."

Barstow looked up and the slouch left his frame. His eyes narrowed and he stood ready for action.

"Draw," shouted Jimmy as his hand flashed down and up almost in the same motion.

The Barstow Kid was a trifle slow. His revolver snarled close upon the echo of Jimmy's. But the Barstow Kid stood upright, unhurt, and Jimmy lay in the dust, blood trickling from his forehead, when it was all over.

For a brief horror-stricken moment Helen stared at the inert form of her brother. Then a cry escaped her white lips and she fell to Jimmy's side, cradling his head in her lap.

Walking in a daze, the Barstow Kid came forward, sheathing his smoking revolver. He had not seen Helen.

"Do—do you know him?" he asked in a dry voice.

Helen looked up, her face white and expressionless, her breast covered with blood.

"Know him?" she repeated. "Know him! He's my brother, and you've killed him."

It took a full minute for the words to sink into the dazed Kid's mind and then it seared his brain like a red-hot iron. Panic overcame him and his first thought was for self-preservation. He was like a drowning man clutching at a straw.

"But—but I had to," he said lamely. "He drew first. He—"

"I know," said Helen in a lifeless voice. "I'll be fair. I've seen enough of these things to know you had a right to do it. He drew first. He just got through telling me he was going to kill you, although I didn't know who he meant at the time. I could forgive you for what happened to Bill. He was a half-brother and it was he who killed my husband in a fit of drunken rage. But Jimmy, here, was my blood brother. We grew up together. And you killed him. That finishes everything for us. Please go away. Don't ever try to see me again."

The Barstow Kid's dazed spirit still fought on against the disaster that was overwhelming him. He hardly realized that he was speaking.

"But you admit I shot in self-defense," he argued. "You admit I had to do it. Then why—"

Sudden tears came to Helen's eyes and she shook her head angrily.

"Don't be a fool," she snapped. "Jimmy was my brother. My *brother.* Do you understand? Do you think I could ever go through with our plans, always knowing that it was you who killed Jimmy? I'm not saying you didn't have a right to do it. I'm just saying that he was my brother and that I hate you."

Without another word the Barstow Kid turned and strode over to his pony. He mounted and rode off without a backward glance.

"Damn'," he muttered angrily, "seems as though every sucker I have to shoot is a brother to somebody."

TWO weeks later the Barstow Kid was riding range for the Bar-Z. He could not bring himself to leave the country. The Bar-Z was some twenty miles from the Bar-L and Helen.

"I'm a damn' fool," he told himself. "I oughtta hit the wind and clear out so's I could forget all about it."

And although he admitted the logic of the argument, the Kid stayed on at the Bar-Z.

On this particular day the Kid was riding fence, miles from the Bar-Z ranchhouse and miles closer to the Bar-L. He liked the task because it gave him a chance to be alone. And the Kid wanted to be alone above everything else.

He was indulging in some particularly gloomy thoughts when sight of a madly galloping horse aroused him from his reverie. The horse came closer and the Kid made out the form of old Hank, the ancient cook of the Bar-L, in the saddle.

The Kid's body grew tense as Hank came forward. A premonition of disaster overcome him. Old Hank's face was white and his eyes were terror-stricken.

"The Don Pedro gang," Hank gasped as his wearied horse came to a stop. "All Hell's bust loose. Hurry, get the boys."

"Talk slower and say more," snapped the Kid, grasping old Hank's arm.

"Ouch, yore hurting." cried Hank. "On the East Section. Part of the gang was running some three-year-olds off the section. Zeke and a few of the boys caught 'em and there was a fight. Then Don Pedro and the rest of the gang came up. They're fighting it out in Dry Wash. Our boys is trapped and Don Pedro's men're picking 'em off."

"And Helen?" demanded the Kid.

"She's with 'em," gasped Hank. "Hey, you ain't tackling 'em by yourself are you? Wait, you fool, and get the boys."

But the Kid, leaning far out over the saddle and riding the wings of a black fear did not answer.

LYING flat on their stomachs on the pebbly bottom of an arid ravine, five men and a girl were fighting valiantly against the horde of Mexicans and half-breeds who faced them from behind piles of protecting boulders. Each one was conserving ammunition, aiming carefully and firing only when it seemed certain that the shot would find its mark in human flesh. Each battled desperately, courageously against the overwhelming odds. And none fought more gallantly than the black-haired girl whose smoking six-shooter burned the tender flesh of cheek and hand.

Don Pedro's men crept closer, closer behind the shelter of rocks.

YOUNG Lenny Howard, lying in the trench, shuddered as his breast seemed to explode and spout fragments of flesh and blood. Sobbing, Helen aimed, fired, aimed, fired, and heeded not the fact that the weapon she held was scorching her fingers and branding her cheek.

Don Pedro called his men closer together. They bunched behind the last protective clump of boulders and prepared for the last desperate dash across the open space and into the trench held by the valiant handful. Men such as Don Pedro's preferred to fight in packs and such odds as were in their favor were to their liking. A brief dash and all would be over.

The black-haired girl in the trench bit her white lips and fired steadily, carefully and with effect. The man beside her threw down his revolver with a curse. He was out of ammunition. Soon the others did the same. The girl, alone, had a cartridge left.

There was a sudden burst of firing from the direction of the enemy. The men opened pocket knives and waited; their teeth bared in snarls of hate. The girl slowly, ever so slowly, cocked the revolver, placing the lone cartridge in position to fire. The firing increased. The entrapped band gasped in amazement. Weary hands went to burning eyes, as if seeking to wipe away strange, heat-born visions.

Coming down the slope of the hill, racing toward the men of Don Pedro, was a whirlwind—a whirlwind of dust and flashing hoofs and the red flash and roar of gunfire.

Straight down the slope came the apparition; straight toward the alarmed band of men who had turned in sudden fright to face the hail of lead singing its way into their ranks from guns held in either hand of the creature who bestrode the whirlwind. And there was no stopping this shooting whirlwind.

The men of Don Pedro saw their leader go down in the first burst. A sudden wave of black fear engulfed them, blinded them, made their pistol arms weak. They fired but it is doubtful that any of them aimed. This wild horse was whirling like a creature gone mad and its sharp hoofs crushed the milling band of men. Its rider assumed the proportions of a giant, an evil, awesome giant who could neither be killed nor hurt.

The men of Don Pedro broke and fled—fled in wild terror from one man—one man who had fired but twelve shots and made them do the work of 100—one man who had been so entirely willing to die that he could not be killed.

THE Barstow Kid dismounted and walked slowly forward. He turned to watch the fear-stricken Don Pedro band mount and flee and then he came on. He avoided the dazed gaze of Helen. She'd probably be nice now, he thought bitterly. She was a good sport. She'd figure she owed him something for what he'd done. Well, he didn't want things that way. Suddenly he felt tired and dejected. The wave of terror that had sent him on his mad ride was dispelled now that Helen lived and in its place came utter weariness.

Then through the sweat that dimmed his eyes he saw a familiar figure. Jimmy Bradford was standing beside old Zeke, staring up at him. Jimmy alive.

"Hullo," said the Kid, fighting hard to appear calm. "You're shore hard to kill, ain't you? If yo're still hell-bent on shooting me on account of yore brother you'd better wait a piece because I'm plumb outta ammunition and ambition."

Jimmy leaped from the gully and his slim brown hand clasped the Kid's.

"Listen, fella," he spoke earnestly, "I been a fool—a low-down damned fool doing things 'cause I thought people expected me to do 'em. Why, I'd kill my own brother for you, Kid, and Bill, he was only my half-brother and plumb worthless at that."

Then Jimmy noticed that the Barstow Kid was purposely avoiding Helen's pleading glance. He grinned and stepped closer, whispering:

"Lissen, Kid," he said, "you only creased my dome. That nick wasn't half what I got for my damn' foolishness. Soon's I opened my eyes, Helen, she started beefing. She said I chased you away and that if I didn't get better and go find you, she'd do a expert job of killing me and—"

The Barstow Kid turned, looked into Helen's eyes, saw something there and the weariness suddenly left him.

REWARD RIDER

By FRED McLAUGHLIN

Latigo Jack rode the cross-fire trail. It was lawman's noose or outlaw's lead for that peace-loving cowpoke who was doomed to die!

"A CHEAP crook!" rasped Latigo Jack, whose gun leaped to his hand like a thing of life. Squint Taylor came to his feet and a long knife in his deft fingers described a swift arc. Jack fired once. The knife slithered to the table, struck point down and stood quivering. Squint Taylor let out a wild screech, grabbed his injured right hand with his good left, and performed an Indian war dance. "I'm killed," he yelled, "I'm killed!"

"No such luck," said Jack, "but you orta be. Six cards in one poker hand—and one of 'em off the bottom of the deck. What kinda game you play, hombre? I'm new in this country. Where I come from five cards is the rule, and we don't break

no poker rules and expect to stay healthy."

Two more men who had been in the game, two still-faced men with the long sensitive fingers of card experts or gunmen, joined the argument, one with a flaming six-gun, the other with a knife. The six-gun failed to find its mark because Latigo Jack had given the table a quick thrust, spoiling the gambler's aim, and the knife-wielder missed in that lightning-like lunge because Jack's weapon had blasted a hole in his shoulder. He went down, coughing and cursing, and the gang in Malinche's only saloon set up an ominous roar.

The crowd started forward.

Latigo Jack's left hand appeared with another gun, and he waved them back and forth in front of the crowd that had moved upon him.

"I ain't lookin' for no trouble," he said softly, "but I ain't runnin' from none either. I come in here peaceful and quiet and sit down in what looks to be a respectable game of jackpot—and that dancing dervish tries to cross me."

He slid along the wall toward the door. "I'm Latigo Jack from Laredo, and I ain't got no bullets for nobody that lets me alone."

Somebody in the crowd laughed and said: "Latigo Jack—huh! You may be Latigo Jack in Laredo, hombre, but out here in Malinche you're Blackie Kern, road-trimmer, and there's a rope waitin' for you."

Jack laughed. "Yeah? And nobody with nerve enough to put it around my neck. You got me wrong, hombre. I'm leavin' this place. I'm willing to leave it nice and regular if you let me, and I'm willing to shoot my way clear if you try to stop me."

He had nearly reached the door, his dark eyes and his menacing gun on the dozen men who faced him, when the door opened suddenly. It opened with such violence that Latigo Jack was thrown momentarily off balance. He whirled toward the door, guns half raised, but stopped midway in his gesture and stood motionless when he saw a slim figure facing him, pistol drawn.

There was something in that lithe graceful figure, something in the iron rigidity of the pointing gun, something in the lean, strong face, and in the unwavering gray eyes, that told the man from Laredo he wasn't up against a crooked gambler or a saloon loafer, but a cold and calculating human machine. A man who knew no fear and whose attitude denoted skill and efficiency.

"Drop your guns, Blackie," said the newcomer, in a voice as cold as ice.

"Who says?" Latigo Jack tried a grin that wasn't much of a success.

"Bob Randall, deputy sheriff of Sonora. Drop 'em quick, Blackie. You're under arrest."

JACK'S guns clattered to the floor at his feet. He laughed, then drew his heavy black bushy eyebrows together in thought.

"Why do you call me Blackie, Mister Randall, and why am I under arrest? For plugging a coupla card sharks that somebody orta killed long ago?"

The faintest ghost of a smile touched the deputy's face. "There's only one pair of eyebrows like yours in the world, Blackie. The rest of your face has always been covered by a mask, but nobody can miss them eyebrows of yours. This here scrap with Squint and his pals don't interest me."

"What does?"

"There's a hold-up at Sabinal, where Blackie Kern killed the cashier. Old Man Timberlake lost his black horse, and you were riding him when you beat it out of Sabinal. That horse is tied out front right now. Sure got a nerve—you have. There's a stage stick-up over in the Floridas last Wednesday, where you lifted nearly three thousand dollars, some in fifty-dollar bills, and you passed a fifty-dollar bill over the bar right here less than half an hour ago."

"What else?" Jack wanted to know, his hands still shoulder high before the urge of the deputy's gun. "What else, Mister Deputy? You sure talk interestin'."

"You and a Mex robbed Tyndall Cox of the money he got for his four carloads of three-year-olds and you bumped the Mex off to make your getaway easy. There's plenty, Blackie, plenty you done."

"Must be a big reward out for me," Latigo Jack mused.

"There is, Blackie. Five thousand dollars, dead or alive—and I'd just as soon take you dead."

"You look like a nice deputy," said Jack, extending his hands cautiously for the waiting handcuffs, "and I'm gonna make that five thousand job look easy to you."

Randall smiled and holstered his gun. He started to work on the handcuffs. Latigo Jack went into action so swift and so sudden that every man in the room was caught unprepared. He swung his right fist against Randall's jaw with force enough to flatten the deputy. With his left hand he swept one of his guns from the floor, and almost in the same movement he took a header out the door.

Three swift strides brought him to the long-legged black that had once belonged to Old Man Timberlake. He legged up, pointed down the single street of the town, and sped along under a brilliant moon. He lay low over the horse's withers to shield his body as much as possible from bullets there were beginning to come from the saloon. "Sure is a good hoss I got," he said. "They ain't got a Chinaman's chance to ketch me now."

CLEAR of the town, he looked at the moon, a huge silver disc that hung straight overhead. "Five thousand dollars . . . it's a lotta money. A man orta feel complimented when they offer that much for 'im." He rubbed a left forefinger through the heavy, bushy eyebrows that had been so distinguishing a mark of recognition. "Reckon I'd better get me a eyebrow trim, these things ain't gonna do me no good."

He gave the horse his head for more than an hour. They rushed through the beautiful night, the man riding easily and smoothly, the horse's slim hoofs beating a swift tattoo upon the hard-caked alkali. "Half eagle," said Jack admiringly, "if you had a coupla feathers you could fly."

He topped a low divide and looked back. Three miles behind him, and clear cut against the northern sky, a body of horsemen showed for an instant as they, too, crossed an elevation.

Jack frowned.

"That there Randall baby is gonna be hard to get rid of. A little extra speed won't do me no good so long as they trail me. I gotta try deception. I can't be bothered. I got business, and it ain't with deputies."

He made another mile at a breakneck pace down a dry wash that inclined gently toward the Gila. He turned abruptly out of this to the right along the rocky bed of a side gulch, went two hundred yards and stopped in the gloom and shelter of a cut-bank.

He waited fifteen minutes. He chuckled when he heard the posse go past with a rush of iron-shod hoofs. He waited fifteen minutes more and then put out behind his pursuers. At the Gila crossing he turned eastward and kept his horse in the shallow water at all times. He rode slowly, carefully, for three hours or more, and finally left the river where the bank came down in a long rocky stretch which would show no hoofprints. He had followed the bed of the river for fifteen miles and had left no tracks behind him.

Sunrise found him in a tiny clump of piñon cooking a rabbit his ready pistol had brought down. His appetite satisfied, he rolled a brown paper cigarette, took two or three long pulls at it, and cast it at the dying fire. He drew out his hunting-case watch, opened the back of it, polished the smooth gold surface with a bandanna handkerchief and looked at his own face in this extemporized mirror.

"You ain't so easy to look at, Latigo," he said, "they's too much hair on yore face, and it's too black. Too much eyebrows, too much mustache, and too much beard. You orta purty yoreself up some. Bein' a bandit ain't no excuse to look like one." He laughed softly, extracted a knife from a trousers pocket and sharpened a blade of it on his boot leg.

He went to work first on the luxurious growth of eyebrows, holding with his left hand and slashing with his right, and using the back of his watch for a mirror. Next his mustache went, and then his beard. He studied his handiwork. "Looks like a brunette oat patch," he said, "cut by a left-handed washerwoman with a right-handed scythe. Not so good. Well, Latigo, here goes for a shave del diablo.

He found a box of matches, lighted one of them and touched the flame for an instant to the side of his face. Scorched whiskers curled and filled the air with pungent perfume.

Latigo rubbed the place briskly, swearing the while. Another touch of flame,

another searing smell, another instant of violent rubbing, and another stream of profanity. This agonizing performance continued for half an hour. By such Spartan methods Latigo Jack managed to clear his face of every vestige of hair. His face smarted.

He smiled at himself in the tiny mirror. He looked twenty years younger. "You aint' no bandit," he said to his reflection, "that there hedge just made you look tough."

He slipped the saddle off the black horse, which was streaked with white from drying sweat, and rubbed him down with the upper surface of the saddle blanket. "Good old hoss," he said admiringly, "old Timberlake sure knows horse flesh when he sees it."

He grinned approvingly.

The black had been tied by the simple expedient of dropping the loop of the bridle reins over a snag. Latigo slipped the head-stall off and drew the bit from the horse's mouth. "Crop around a little, old son," he invited, "pretty soon you and me has got to make some goin's."

The horse, free at last, squealed, lunged clear, and put out across the sagebrush bench, head and tail up. Latigo watched him, open-mouthed in amazement, watched him until the speeding creature disappeared behind a ridge a mile or two to the east. "Well, I'll be bit by a blind vinegaroon," he rasped, "when you burnt them whiskers off you sure scorched yore brains. Me—a-foot!"

HE rolled himself another cigarette and smoked it down in a few deep draughts. He searched through the saddle bags and found a thin shirt that was technically white, which he put on to replace the coarse brown one he had been wearing. He dragged off boots and trousers and put on neat tan shoes and narrow light pin-striped trousers salvaged from the saddle-bags, transferring the belt with its holstered gun and rank of shells and a wallet containing a considerable sum of money, some of it in fifty-dollar bills. "If anybody calls me Blackie Kern now," he said, "I'll slap him down."

He cached the saddle in a piñon clump and put out in a direction opposite from that in which the black had gone. "Me walkin'," he grumbled, "me a-foot . . . who'd 'a' thought it?"

He had walked scarcely a mile when he met a horseman riding east. The cowboy drew up and waited, grinning appreciatively. Latigo dropped his hand to his gun stock, but remembered his changed status and appearance. No one could possibly take him for Blackie Kern now, and Timberlake's stolen horse had long since moved out of the picture.

"Where's the circus?" said the cowpoke.

Latigo grinned.

"Looks like you're all dressed up to be queen of the May," said the cowboy.

"I'm ridin'," Latigo explained, "and the dam' cayuse puts his foot in a dog hole and breaks his neck. I can't walk with no boots on. Where you workin'?"

"Old Man Timberlake's."

Latigo rubbed his chin. "Humph," he said, "Old Man Timberlake." He laughed. No wonder the black had high-tailed, he was going home. "How far is it to Timberlake's?"

"About five miles—straight east."

"I'm goin' west. Can I buy a hoss at Timberlake's?"

The cowboy slipped to the ground. "You can buy a hoss right here, feller, a dam' good hoss. This here pinto is as fast as any critter of his size and speed in the county."

Latigo considered the beast. "Sounds good," he admitted, "not a bad-lookin' hoss neither. For about thirty-five dollars he wouldn't be such a bargain."

"He's so good at forty," said the cowpoke, "I'd have to sell him for fifty. I've gotta walk home—and it's wu'th ten dollars to walk five miles."

"Sure is," Latigo agreed.

He opened the wallet and drew out a fifty-dollar bill, remembered what that other fifty had done to him, and put it back again. He found two twenties and a ten and proffered them to the horse merchant, who folded the money in a tight pellet and thrust it into his shirt pocket.

"If you want any more cayuses," he said, dragging off his saddle and blanket, "I'll sell you my string at twenty-five dollars each."

Latigon Jack threw a leg over his purchase and pointed him toward the piñon clump where his saddle was cached. "If

this here crow-bait kin make fifty miles between now and sundown, I'll think he's a bargain; if he can't, I hope his spirit ha'nts you."

WITH his own saddle under him again, and the stirrup-fitting boots on his feet, Latigo rode west and south to the full limit of the pinto's speed, which wasn't anything to brag about. He rode fast for two reasons: he had urgent and important duties to transact, and he knew that the horse-selling cow-poke would put two and two together when he got home and discovered Old Man Timberlake's stolen black —minus saddle and bridle—had returned.

In his three hours of travel he crossed many tracks on the vast alkali and sagebrush plain. Each track was examined with the greatest care. He came at last to one that suited him. He chuckled. "I could tell that old bay's left hind foot-print in a million."

This trail he followed swiftly and easily. It led nearly due west, pointing toward the Little Burros, that showed faint in the desert haze.

When the sun stood straight overhead, making an oven of the world, and heat waves billowed over the plain, Latigo Jack crossed the path of a body of horsemen. They were riding northward, toward Malinche, and moving slow on horses that seemed jaded from hard riding. He waited for them, and recognized Bob Randall in the lead.

"Where you ridin'?" asked the deputy, who could see nothing of Blackie Kern in this smooth-faced, white-shirted, fancy-trousered dandy who looked like a clerk.

"Me?" said Latigo, raising his ordinarily deep voice two or three notes. "I'm ridin' to Sunbright, they's a job waitin' for me."

"Well," said one of the posse, grinning, "look out for Blackie Kern. He's on the loose, he's liable to make a meal outa you. We had him and lost his trail an' when we catch him—"

"Oh," said Latigo, "hope I don't see him!"

They laughed and rode on. Latigo Jack watched them. "Lost his trail," he chuckled, "and me settin' right on top of it."

He headed the pinto west again. In another hour he was climbing the gently inclined bench of the little Burros, where the soft alkali soil gave way to rocky talus from the hills. The trail was harder to follow, and Jack had to dismount often to make certain. His progress was slow and laborious, but sure. He went deeper into the hills, never losing sight of the familiar trail he had followed for more than twenty miles.

He reached the crest, a low wide saddle. Here were many tracks, as though the rider of the horse he was trailing had used the place as a lookout, had sat his mount and watched, waiting.

Latigo rode around in ever-widening circles, endeavoring to pick up a departing trail from the jumble. He was so intent on his scrutiny of the ground that he did not see his quarry until it was too late.

"Put 'em up!" said a harsh, commanding voice, and Latigo, whose judgment was equal to his courage, raised his hands before he looked.

A man of Latigo Jack's size sat a big bay and aimed two six-guns at him. The stick-up man's hair was black, his eyebrows were heavy and black and bushy, and a black stubble covered his cheeks and chin. He was grinning. The bay pointed his ears, and nickered as though he had found a friend.

Latigo grinned also. "You got me right, pardner."

"I've been watchin' yuh," said the man with the guns. "Yuh been trailin' me for a hour."

"Longer'n that, mister. I been trailin' you all day."

The quarry swore. "How come you know this here bay's tracks so well?"

"They's a inside caulk off'n his left hind foot. You can't miss him."

"Yeah? Well, unbuckle that gun belt, hombre, with yore left hand, and don't try to draw. Good . . . Now drop it. That's fine. You know what it means to trail Blackie Kern?"

Latigo shook his head.

"It means a bullet between the eyes. I don't trust nobody, leastwise nobody that follows me all day. Lone hand—that's me. I've made more buzzard bait than any man in this state, and I'm gonna make buzzard bait outa you. If you got sump'n to say, you'd better say it quick, because—"

Latigo had a lot to say, and it was all

included in one short, sharp whistle that the big bay horse accepted as a signal. In an instant he had turned himself into an equine cyclone that Blackie Kern, who had been caught off guard, found impossible to master.

The bandit's guns went flying and he reached for leather as the bay took a header into the air. He struck the ground stiff-legged, and Blackie Kern's teeth came together with a resounding click. The bay's head went down, his hind feet went up, and the bandit cursed and clawed wildly to keep from falling.

THE horse, seeming suddenly to have gone loco, leaped high, shook himself like a sportive porpoise, and the amazed rider waggled like a scare-crow in a high wind. The beast went off the ground again, his head pointing west, twisted his body like a pinwheel and came back to earth with his head toward the east.

That last maneuver was too much for Blackie, who lost his mount. He performed half a loop, hit the ground on one shoulder and the back of his head, and lay, groaning and cursing.

"Atta-boy, Keeno," said Latigo, sliding off his pinto and standing over the prostrate figure, his pistol in hand. "Atta-boy —you got more brains than any cayuse I ever owned!"

Blackie Kern sat up slowly, touched a caressing hand to the back of his head, and looked around half dazed. "Any hoss *you* ever owned, huh?"

"Yes, sir, Blackie. Yesterday you traded me a stolen hoss, a hoss you lifted off'n Old Man Timberlake, which wasn't no kinda trick to play a man. I thought at the time you was a pore hoss-trader."

Blackie's heavy boot came up and kicked Latigo Jack on the shin. Latigo leaned over in a sudden spasm of pain and the bandit kicked again. This time his foot found Latigo's wrist and the gun went spinning.

Jack dived—spread-eagled—on top of his man, and the two rolled over and over, clawing and kicking and gasping, a writhing mass of arms and legs. They came to their feet, fists pumping, arms swinging, shoulders and elbows blocking, heads weaving. Rib-bending thrusts and jaw-shaking smashes, wind-mill swings that landed and brought forth oaths and gasps, or that missed and carried the swinger nearly off his feet.

Very soon Latigo saw that his adversary was the rushing, wild-swinging type, a fighter who must win quickly or not at all, so he spent his time dodging and blocking and putting in a punch to the chin when the way was open. He was somewhat lighter, and quicker on his feet than the bandit, and he gradually wore the man down.

He placed a right hook under Blackie's ear that twisted the bandit's head around, and he drove a straight left to the midriff. Blackie folded up, leaving his chin open for two swift smashes that put him out. Down he went, and the gound seemed to shake with the force of his fall.

BEFORE sunset Latigo had reached their destination. The men of Malinche came running. They saw a black-bearded, black-eyebrowed man, with a badly bruised face, who was tied to the pinto he was riding, followed by a desert dandy on a big bay. The dandy held a gun ready. He called for Bob Randall, who stepped forward through the crowd. "This here is Blackie Kern," said Latigo, "and I'm askin' five thousand dollars for him."

Randall grinned. "Glad to see both of you, mister. Who are you?"

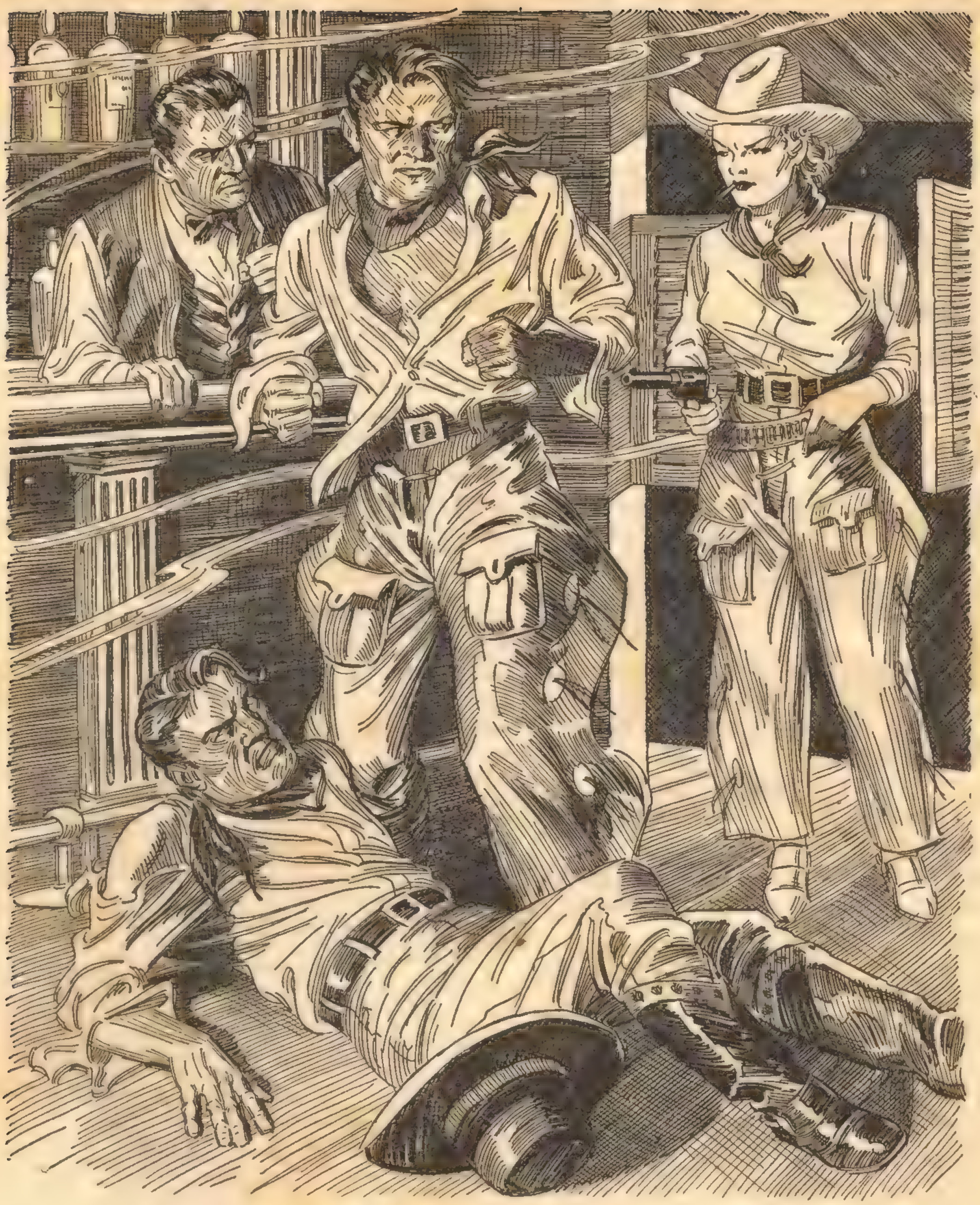
"Me? I'm Latigo Jack, from Laredo. I changed my face some because I don't wanta look like that hombre."

"And that fifty-dollar bill?" questioned Randall.

"Well, you see," said Latigo, "it's this way. Them was my own fifty-dollar bills. I sold a little patch of grazin' land down near Laredo and thought I'd come out here to the wild and wooly West and buy me in on a little ranch. With that extra five thousand, I reckon I'll buy in on a bigger ranch. I'm ready to stand trial for shootin' them crooked gamblers."

The deputy laughed. "Don't worry about that, Latigo, don't worry about them gamblers a-tall. If they're still alive, they're playin' poker somewheres else."

"A six-card hand always did mean travelin'," mused Latigo Jack. "Sometimes for all parties concerned."



THE HELLCAT OF RUSTLER'S RANGE

By JAMES P. OLSEN

Lilith they called her! She packed a woman's dangerous heart beneath a gunnie's hideout holster—double dynamite, even for the maverick-taming Tumbleweed Kid.

"STRANGER to these parts?"

The man addressed sighed, turned slowly and eyed the speaker very sleepily. "Yuh ever see me afore?" he questioned back, his voice soft, lazy. "If yuh did, I reckon I ain't no stranger. Leastwise, I know my hoss ain't strange to yuh. Yuh seen uh double-rigged kak; I don't

take me no dallies, an' I rides them boogery. Th' boogerier they is th' higher I rides them."

"Sure, Texas gunnie, I looked over your outfit. Funny, ain't it, now, that you'd blow in here about this time? And blowing in with no reason, I'm asking you again . . ."

The man from the Southwest yawned. He was a tallish sort of hairpin. His eyes were a queer, frosty blue; his hair light. A square, frank face seemed lined with sleep. Again he yawned, a twinkle coming into those frosty eyes when he made sure this was making Blackie Strunk—the curious gent—plenty much sore.

"Ask, an' be hanged, big nose. I'm jest uh rollin' tumbleweed, me. I rolls where I pleases, an' I rolls my gun some, too. I hate *pelados* as don't mind they own business. I disremember, eggzactly, but I think th' last fi'-six nosey rannies what tromped my toes was planted."

"You answer my question," Strunk barked. "Tumbleweeds don't blow far on this range."

"Tumble . . . Weed. Hmmm, yep, thet's my brand. Take uh tumble an' go on away. I likes my likker without th' smell uh skunk p'lutin' th' air. Heah's uh dime. Go buy uh tin bill and git busy with th' chickens. Yuh sound like uh dogie caf lost in th' bresh: all bawl an' beller. Well?"

Strunk seemed paralyzed with surprise. Jack Fall's saloon was not without its share of lounging hard customers; furtive-eyed gunmen and silent gents who rode their own trails and kept their own counsel. Yet, not a one there that Strunk figured would yammer at him like this slow, deep-water hairpin who'd ridden into town an hour before.

Someone chuckled. Strunk, fingers working on the butt of his gun, turned his head to glare. It was a tense moment. A question or two; a man who demanded to be let alone, and a situation builded that would call for gunplay if Strunk would save his face and his rep as a bad hombre from the very source of Salt Creek. A low grunt on his lips, Strunk turned his red-mottled face back to the stranger.

The slow man who'd called himself Tumble Weed—well, he was no fool. The high heel of his right boot came down squarely on the arch of Strunk's right foot. At the same time his left fist popped Strunk on the ear.

For just an instant, pain-shot and off balance, Strunk was in no shape to drag his hogleg. In that instant, it was whisked from his holster and presented to him, muzzle first. Tumble Weed seemed not to see Strunk. Gravely, thumb drawing back the hammer of Strunk's own .45, he looked at the weapon.

An evident light thumb that held that hammer back. Strunk paled and you could see his stomach draw inward, as if to brace against the impact of his own lead.

"Fo'ty-fi', huh?" Tumble Weed mused. He shook his head. "Fo'ty-fo' is better. I betcha. . . . Naw, I wouldn't. Yuh'd be daid, an' couldn't nowise pay."

Thus he stood, cocking his head first to one side, then to the other. Strunk, face a purple map of rage, stood facing him a few feet away. He didn't know which way to turn. This hellion had seemed too sleepy and peaceful. How'd he done it? No one spoke. There were men there whose names were shouted with damning phrases where killers were known.

Not a one of them would have been in Strunk's place.

They knew. Strunk would have to fight them all, now. Lesser gunmen would smoke for him. They'd seen his iron hauled against him; it would give them nerve. The clock above the bar ticked away breathless seconds. Who would move first—the Tumble gent, or Strunk?

THE bat-wing doors were shoved suddenly inward. Someone shuffled his feet; someone else murmured. Tumble dared look that way briefly. Any other man might have shown surprise. To his credit that he did not. Not any a-tall. He took in the strange figure that stood in the door in one fleeting glance. Instant, almost, yet he could have told about her to minute details.

Not such a small woman; young, and hard. Short-cropped black hair edged from under her white sombrero. The tag of a Durham sack dangled from a shirt pocket. Her chaps were angora of the cold Montana range. And she wore a heavy six-gun, low and tied down snug.

Her rather handsome face matched Tumble's own, as far as lack of expression was

concerned. Dark eyes took in the scene. Abruptly, her voice rather deep, but soft, she spoke.

"Strunk, you laid your twine on a boogery stray, huh?"

Strunk swallowed hard and growled. He seemed on the point of springing on the other. Almost absently, Tumble raised Strunk's gun a trifle. Strunk changed his mind.

"I looked around, and he kicked me!" he snarled.

"Well. And you had no better sense than to look around?" Fine sarcasm tinged the words. Strunk breathed heavily. The girl turned on Tumble Weed.

"And you. . . . What do you mean by opening the season on my foreman? You know what it means; such a thing as this. What's your business?"

"Thet's what got him in trouble, mister —er, ma'am," Tumble Weed drawled. He grinned. It seemed contagious. The girl's own full, red lips twisted in a faint smile.

"Well, don't answer, then. But let him go. He's my foreman. He has his uses, such as they are. Strunk, roll your tail for the ranch. And after this, don't forget that I'll do the questioning for the Scarab Ranch. Yes, and the gunning, too, if I have to."

It didn't strike Tumble as strange. He believed she could use that six-gun she toted. Like a woman, to take unfair advantage of a man. But then, looks of some of these hairpins, they'd shoot a woman same as a man. It looked like an interesting country.

Tumble shucked the shells out of Strunk's gun and tossed it to the girl. Instantly, Strunk lunged forward. He brought up with a grunt. Tumble's holster was empty; the muzzle of his .44 spread Strunk's recent dinner two ways within him.

"You dirty son. I'll get you!"

Strunk snatched his empty Colt out of the girl's hand and stomped out. The girl turned and followed him. At the doors, she stopped. Her eyes seemed to bore into Tumble. She jerked her head, a queenly attitude of command; then walked on out.

Tumble scratched his head. No one spoke to him. They wanted none of his business, not after that draw he'd flashed.

A shrug, and Tumble followed the girl out. Strunk was giving his horse steel, riding out of town fast. The girl stood at the hitch rack, down in front of the general store. Tumble leaned on the rack, built a smoke and said nothing.

"Stranger, I'm Lilith Gayle. I own the Scarab outfit."

"Hmmm," Tumble fogged smoke through his nose. "Lilith, Mother of Demons. I take it yuh git yuh brand from th' fact th' ancients wore amulets an' scarabs to warn Lilith away from eatin' the kids, huh?"

Lilith showed surprise. "You're not uneducated, cowboy," she almost made an accusation of it.

"I ain't ejjicated, in books, so much," he shook his head. "Ma'am, I rides uh lot, I reads uh lot. When I was in my prime," he grinned slowly, "I roped some. Them's my three R's: Readin', ramblin', ropin'."

"And shooting! Gunhand—it sticks out allover you. All right, I'm offering you a job. I like your style, and your looks. I might love a man like you; if I'm ever fool enough to love any man."

Tumble colored to the roots of his hair. This she-critter sure as blazes said what she thought on certain matters. Tumble considered, then shook his head. "Reckon not. I've tangled with yuh foreman. It wouldn't eggzactly be no party."

"It won't, anyhow!" she snapped, half angry. "Strunk won't last a week around here now. He's a killing coming. Jack Fall put him on the ranch; for a reason. Fall. . . ."

"I don't know who this Jack Fall hombre is, ma'am. But, yuh say I done fixed yuh foreman, who yuh hint wasn't all Mister Hoyle puts in th' book uh foreman oughta be. All right. I'll take yuh job. Because I can see somethin' else. Yuh want me where yuh can keep yuh eye on me, because yuh can't figger me out."

"Right," Lilith admitted. "You have a purpose. Well, I want to tie you up with me. Give that rotten Broadus nest of rustling skunks a gunman, and it means wide open murder on this range."

"An' yuh aims to corner th' murder market yuhse'f," Tumble grunted. He hesitated a moment, shrugged his shoulders then, and motioned for her to ride. Angry-appearing over his last remark, Lilith

slammed her bronc with spurs and left a cloud of dust hanging in the air.

Lilith—Mother of Demons. And she led a strange gent who called himself Tumble Weed right straight to meet her children!

II

TWO miles out of town, Lilith slowed her horse to a walk. The country round about was rolling, leading into the foothills and the snow-capped mountains to the west. Nice little range for a war, this country. Alders and aspen along the stream. Patches of sarvice berries and chokecherries in the coulees; stretches of brush and cedar and pine on the slopes and hills. Flat range, plenty rolling, with lots of skylining possible, too.

All of this did not escape Tumble's keen eyes. Now, he rolled a quirly, snapped a match to light and leaned over, touching the flame to the neat little brownie the girl had built for herself. She stared directly at him. A queer feeling seemed to take possession of Tumble's spine.

A few nervous puffs, and Lilith snapped her smoke away. "Gunhand, what's your game?" she demanded abruptly.

"No game," Tumble shook his head slowly. "No game, ma'am, except th' game uh livin'. Livin' an' passin' on what uh book feller once told me was uh heritage uh hell. My pap was uh gunman; he wore th' star of uh marshal an' th' badge of uh Ranger, times.

"Outlaws got him, skunk like. Since I bin able to paw uh Colt, I bin trailin' here an' yonderly. I hate trouble, ma'am. I hate th' skunks thet raise it. Yet, I'm bound to hunt trouble. It's in my blood, I reckon. So, I hunts it to stop it. No excuse. I'm jest uh gundog. I bin lead-lucky, so far. They's only one thing I ask for."

"Yes?"

"When th' last outlaw an' blood-lettin' devil is kilt, I want to be buried too. I hate it, yet it's my life. Sabe? I reckon yuh don't. I don't savvy her mys'f, so much."

"I understand, more than you might think," Lilith nodded. "Hell's heritage! God, how that fits me, too. Called from school, forced to play a man's part. And now, forced to fight a bunch of devils, even skunk nester women. . . ."

"I'm int'rested."

"Not much to tell. My mother was part Nez Perce. My father built our spread with a short conscience and a long loop. So long, that it grew on him, and he never stopped tossing them long, even when he could. Well, someone bush-whacked him. I had to come home, and take up where he laid down. And the skunks that 'bushed him. . . . My fool young brother is trying to make love to a sheep-faced daughter! That's the Broadus clan!"

"Yuh mentioned Jack Fall, ma'am."

"Cut the 'ma'am' stuff. I'm Lilith to you, gunhand," she snapped. "Yes, I mentioned Jack Fall. He owns Crescent J ranch, next to Scarab. He owns the law, and that saloon you were in. And he wants to own me. Like a fool, he thinks he'll break me; get the Scarab and me, too. Well," she patted the gun at her side, "this is the way he'll get me. Like this!"

The heavy Colt was out of the leather in a streak; it flashed a trailer of smoke out into the damp air of the raw autumn day. A cottontail under a clump of brush, yards away, fell kicking. Lilith gave Tumble a thin glance. "For you, too, if you ain't shooting straight."

"Yuh took me on awful quick, to be slammin' hints at me now," Tumble grunted.. He made no mention of the fact she was quicker than the average man with that six-gun. Heritage, he guessed, from her dad.

"I did. I said I liked you; I can use you. That's my way."

"Fine. Yuh can use me as uh gunhand —only!"

"You might love me."

"'O, Lord, I've never lived where churches grow,
I loved creation better as it stood
Thet day yuh finished it so long ago
An' looked upon yuh work an' called it good. . . .'"

Tumble quoted a bit of The Cowboy's Prayer. He chuckled. "I like creation —me. But th' Big Wagon Boss created lots uh things before wimmen."

"Including liars. Don't forget my gun!" Lilith flashed.

"I'm still watchin' thet gun," Tumble shrugged. "My own, too. An' I'm won-

derin' what my first job is with yuh."

"Jobs will come to you, gunhand. Like to my old foreman. I think Eff and George Broadus did that job for Jack Fall. So Strunk could come on and try to ruin things for me. I understood part of that. I took Strunk—to watch him. That's why I want you. I'm tired of playing with him. You seemed to have a good start against him. . . ."

TUMBLE frowned and shook his head. A wise, hard man was bad enough. But a woman. . . . He began to wish he'd gone at his job some other way. And Lilith had warned she knew he still lied. Yet, willing to chance him, because she wanted a gunman at her call.

"Yuh brother, Lilith," Tumble made talk. "Yuh say he's herdin'. . . ."

"With that Phenie Broadus wench! Bud's a milk-sop. Can't shoot any too well. That's where you come in, again. Yeah, gunhand. You're going to put George Broadus where he belongs, and dear brother Bud gets the blame. See if Phenie likes him so well after that!"

"'Let me be easy on th' man thet's down.
An' make me square an' generous with all;
I'm careless, Lord, sometimes when I'm in town,
But never let them say I'm mean, or small. . . .'"

Tumble quoted from his favorite again. His meaning seemed to flick Lilith on the raw. She glared a minute. Then, her face quivered and she broke out into tears. She slapped her mount with her quirt and raced on ahead. Tumble was left flat-footed, staring after her.

"I think I know yuh better than yuh know yuhse'f," he muttered, speeding up to overtake her.

The girl pulled up on a flat a mile farther on. A ray of sunshine broke through the storm portending blanket of gray clouds. As if to celebrate, a lark alighted on a bush, tilted happily and burst into full-throated song.

"Beautiful," Lilith muttered.

"It's. . . . Look out!"

Tumble catapulted himself from the saddle and swept her to the ground with him. He was like a cat, where before he had been so lazy appearing. It seemed that he twisted himself in mid air; that his blue eyes glinted hoar frost. A steady roll; a roll from two guns. A short-barreled .44 had appeared from under his faded, dusty vest.

Lead told of death as it whispered into a patch of buckbrush along the rim of a draw, to the left of them; lead searched for the rifleman lying in those patches. . . . Found him!

The brush moved violently; a man came to his feet, trying to thumb a six-gun he drew awkwardly; trying to hold his other hand over a hole in his stomach. Another slug ripped into him. For a moment, he stood fully erect. Even where they were, they could see the terrible set of his face. The horror look of a devil who fears death, and knows he is held firm within its icy grasp.

One step; two—three. Blackie Strunk broke into a jerky little walk, coming straight toward them. The walk became a wobbly run. He inclined forward. Faster—faster with each dying step. Then, he crashed face downward in the crisp, dried grass. One hand pawed the ground for a second; he shuddered and lay still.

Tumble broke the silence. "There," he reached for fresh shells—"is th' foreman yuh wanted shet of. Bushwhackin' buzzard. Got his dues."

Silence. The ringing silence of the tomb. Then, low, sad, almost wondering, the lark trilled forth again in the hush after death.

"Oh!" Lilith almost moaned. "Oh. . . ."

"Ma'am, yuh ain't half so bad as yuh figgers," Tumble muttered. He helped her to her feet.

"Oh!" Lilith turned a set face to Tumble, "the poor fool!"

She swung into the saddle. "Come on, gunhand. You're exactly what the doctor ordered as the new foreman of the Scarab spread."

Tumble swallowed hard. He'd thought she was moaning over the killing. And she was showing her contempt for Blackie Strunk. What kind of a woman was she, anyhow? A certain roving gent calling himself Tumble Weed was to find out what sort she was. And he wasn't to be exactly happy in the finding.

III

"GO back on the road to town. You'll find Strunk: dead! This is Tumble Weed; he'll take Strunk's place."

Silence; no questions asked. A few of the hands shoved shovels in their rifle-boots and rode off. Tumble tossed his blankets into a bunk; then went out to wander around the place, to see how the Scarab outfit stacked up. Everywhere, even as he'd seen it in the prompt obeying of orders by the hands, the place showed the rule of a stern hand.

Huge stacks of sweet alfalfa hay in the fields back of the big barn and stables; bunkhouse, harness and blacksmith shop, everything in minute condition. The house was built of logs and big cobblestones hauled up from the swift creek that ran down from the higher foothills. Heavy timber grew along the stream. Tumble liked the looks of it.

Now, he leaned with one foot on the bottom pole of the horse corral, studying the odd brand. A beetle-shaped circle, with little bars, like legs, running out from the sides. He was aware that someone came up and stood a bit to one side of him. Outwardly, however, he seemed asleep.

"So you're Tumble Weed, the next one who takes orders from Lilith!"

Slowly, Tumble turned to the other. Deliberately, he sized the speaker up. A slender, dreamy sort of young waddy; not a bad sort, either. You could see it at first glance. Yet, there were bitter, cynical, hurt lines showing in his face; a smoldering, suppressed glint in his dark eyes.

"Well, I usually does take orders from th' boss. I take it yuh're her brother, Bud? Yeah? Well, Bud, I figgers I'll take some orders from her brother, too, seein' as he's half owner. Orders to everything except to one thing: How I throw my guns."

"You'll get no orders from me, mister gunman," Bud muttered darkly. "No orders of any kind. I don't figure here. I ain't a man. Me, I'm just Lilith's brother!"

He hesitated. Then: "But don't you go bothering Phenie Broadus and her folks. Lilith hates them, because I'm going marry Phenie. She hates them, just because they come to these parts of Montana five years ago and built them up a nice spread. Little outfits has rights. . . ."

"Whoa, Button. Jest keep uh twitch on yuh lip. I ain't said I was botherin' anybody. Yuh're uh age. If yuh sister runs things, it ain't my fault, or bother. I'm here . . ."

"For no good reason!" Bud almost shouted. "You've killed a man already. Maybe he needed it. But his blood is on your hands. You ain't the kind to settle down to ramrodding a spread. No spread; much less one spur-ridden by a she-boss."

"Now what?"

Bud and Tumble turned. Lilith stood back of them. She had not changed her clothes. But minus the bulky angora chaps, Tumble saw she was not as large as she had at first appeared. With her hat off, her mass of dark hair tumbling around her face, she was twice as pretty.

Bud glared at her. "I was warning him to let Phenie and her folks alone," he snapped.

Tumble saw Lilith stiffen. Her eyes fairly snapped. "That little—little . . ."

Bud sprang forward, one hand upraised as if to strike. He stood poised that way for what seemed an eternity. He shook with suppression. Finally the breath leaving his lungs in a gusty sigh, he turned away and fairly ran toward the house.

"That's the crime of it!" he faltered, beatenly. "A man can't hit a woman; much less his sister. And you know it; you know it!"

The scene was finished by the appearance of a rider coming toward the corral. Watching closely, Tumble saw a taunting, meaning smile spear the hard mask of the woman's face. She stood stiff and straight while the rider swung from the saddle and walked toward them.

As usual, Tumble missed no details. He saw a man as tall as himself; a man with steady, greenish eyes, dark red hair; a man who might have been either honest, plain crooked, or killer, for all his manners or looks betrayed him. Somehow, it needed no one to tell the new foreman-gunnie of Scarab that this was Jack Fall.

FALL raised his black sombrero to Lilith and nodded curtly to Tumble. "I hear you have a new foreman, Lilith," Fall said evenly.

"Yeah. The dirty devil you sent here to spy on me and ruin me: he's planted. You heard right. This is my new foreman, Tumble Weed. He's a better gunhand than's hit this range in a long time. Even better than Jack Fall, the skunk!"

Tumble saw Fall whiten. No wonder. The woman was taking advantage. She claimed a man's rights, and a woman's, too.

"Glad to meet you, Tumble," Fall nodded again at Tumble. He did not offer his hand, but Tumble saw the Crescent J owner studied him very closely indeed.

To Lilith—"I have tried to explain that I had nothing to do with Strunk coming to you and saying I knew him; that he was experienced. It was smart. He knew you'd hire him on, just to watch him. And he figured, I believe, that you could not watch him all of the time."

"Liar!" Lilith drawled, intensely.

Fall's fists balled at his sides. Tumble knew what it cost a man to take such talk, even from a woman.

"As for gunmen," Fall went on, huskily, "the range is being overrun with them. Sunup-in-a-Circle and Double-Circle-Cross are bringing them in. They found the Smothered Creek homesteader dead, this morning."

"The devil with homesteaders. Except for the fact the Broadus clan and that ex-foreman of yours, Carl Nation, are supposed to own those brands. Both of them will cover the Scarab iron! I wonder why you don't join with them openly, and say you want to own the range."

"I . . ."

"Don't tell me," Lilith stormed. "You're the one who backed Bud up in mooning over that sheep-faced Broadus wench. You yell that Carl Nation quit you and registered that Double-Circle-Cross iron so to have an iron to cover Crescent J. You know you lie."

Fall, rigid with anger, face furrowed with a mingled expression of bafflement, rage, even hurt, perhaps, made a strange, choked sound deep in his throat and strode to his horse. In the saddle, he looked down at Lilith.

"Grass hogs are beginning to root, Lilith. You watch them. I'm riding with my guns, and I've gunmen. You've heard of Jerd Gymoe and Silk Salk; Lupe Bodett and Chell Taber? Yes; who hasn't. Well, they're on the range. I don't know who this Tumble Weed really is, but he sure rolled and tumbled in here at a queer time. If he isn't running a sandy on you, you better pray he's even twice as good as you think he is."

"What do you think?"

Tumble looked up at Jack Fall. They stared at each other. Tumble couldn't make this Fall out. Still, it sounded like an evasive declaration of war. Fall, too, seemed unable to catalog Tumble just exact.

"I think," he rumbled, "you're pretty slick, and not so sleepy. Hmmm. A sleepy gunnie. . . ." Fall seemed to think hard and find no answer to his thoughts.

"Better think hard, mister. Don't make no mistakes." Tumble advised lightly. "An' don't forgit this: I bin hired on as Scarab segundo to th' lady boss. Until I find th' goin' stopped by six feet uh Montana range, I'm forcin' my lead luck in her pay."

"Fine, tumbling gunman," Fall called out over his shoulder as he rode away. "But be sure you force it right. I'm wishing you luck, too. I—ah-h-h!"

Fall bared white teeth in a snarl. For unexpectedly, Lilith had thrown her arms about Tumble's neck. Her full red lips sought his. For a moment, Tumble was stunned; carried away. He seemed to have lost his senses. And for the time, he was hard put to explain this sudden move. Was it to make Jack Fall jealous? Yes, he guessed that was part of it. The rest?

Lilith released him and stepped back. She was smiling; her eyes were bright. "That's for you, gunhand. Stick with me. I'm learning to love you now."

Tumble rolled a smoke with fingers that trembled a bit. Slowly, he looked up, his eyelids almost together. "Woman's weapons," he sighed. "An' they'll be uh time when yuh'll wish yuh'd played an' fought without them, Lilith."

"I want this trouble cleared up. I may want you."

"Th' trouble will be cleared up. I'm promisin' thet. Jest be certain yuh play uh straight hand. As for me; it's once when yuh don't git what yuh want. Yuh don't really want me. Yuh jest want to be sure."

"So you are sure the trouble will be

cleared up?" Lilith spoke meaningly. "And *you* are warning *me* to play straight. Just what do you mean, gunhand?"

"Sorry I can't take my grub at th' house with yuh tonight," Tumble grinned slowly. "I got to git knowin' with th' hands. An' there's th' old dishpan bein' walloped. Adios, fair señorita. I'll see yuh come manana."

Lilith looked after him as he lazed toward the messhouse. She swallowed hard. Because she was afraid; afraid that she was wanting this man, and afraid she would have to kill him. She knew very well he had another purpose on this range. Well —what?

IV.

"I SAW them—you hear? I saw them!" There was something so tigerishly intense about Lilith that Tumble, standing quiet in the blacksmith shop shook his head almost sadly. And something stirred within him; a feeling of impending action. Two days on the Scarab, champing at the bit, wanting to do his own work, and wondering if he wasn't a fool.

Well, maybe. But he had found out, or believed he had, one thing: No more long ropes were being thrown by that outfit. Scarab had no hand in the killing of the Smothered Creek homesteader, nor a couple that had been found swaying from trees two months previous. But, he could be wrong. Lilith was blood-hunting. He'd said she was trying to corner the murder market. . . . Had some salty hands on the ranch. . . .

"I saw them branding Scarab calves, and running their rotten Sunup-in-a-Circle on the cows with those calves. If you don't believe it, go see for yourself. Over in that patch of timber the far side of Crazyman Coulee. Go on, see for yourself, or I'll make you shunned by every man on this range!"

Bud's voice, then: "Yes? Well, you've done that. I might as well be called. . . . Aw, shucks! I think you're lying. I'll prove it!" There was something despairing, something desperate, in Bud's voice. He flung himself toward the corral. A few minutes later he pounded out of the ranchyard and toward the higher distant foothills.

FOR a minute Tumble stood silent. Then, he turned and edged toward the door of the blacksmith shop. He damned his luck, inwardly. Did this she-devil have eyes all over her? For Lilith, smiling stepped into the doorway.

"You heard," she stated calmly. "You've big ears, Mister Tumble Weed. Funny. Well, you know what to do. I did come on that old devil Eff, and his skunk of a son, George, slapping running irons on some beef. Watched them through my glasses. But it wasn't Scarab stock. It was beef that belonged to that Smothered Creek nester scum."

"Yuh certain?" Tumble asked a bit too eagerly.

Lilith's eyes narrowed. "Gunhand, what you so interested for?" she drawled meaningly.

"Not . . ." Tumble grunted. "Not much. But, why'd yuh send yuh brother up there? Lawd, he ain't no blood-spiller. An' I admire him for it, I sure as shootin' do. An' you—yuh send him to git killed!" Scorn weighed heavily each word that Tumble spoke. Lilith, for once, refused to meet his frosty glare.

"He's not getting killed. But Eff and George are! You're doing that, gunhand. Do it from the brush, or any way. Bud will be cleared of murder, because we'll swear he did it when he caught the killers of Old Dooley, on Smothered Creek. We'll also swear Bud did it."

"Yeh? An' . . ."

"Men are fools," Lilith snorted. "We get rid of those grass-hogging Broadus devils and Bud loses out with that wench of theirs. Can't you see? If Bud is blamed with killing them, she couldn't marry him."

"Yeah, I guess men is big fools, sometimes," Tumble admitted. "Men couldn't figger out nothin' like thet! Well, yuh done set yuh trap. Yuh're orderin' murder done."

"I'm not! I ordered my brother to get the devils who killed Dooley. Now, I'm ordering you, as my foreman, to go help my brother. Is that murder, Mister Lawman?"

"Lawman?"

"Say, gunhand, you don't fool a woman. You come here for reasons. Spit them out; then ride."

Tumble studied the toe of his left boot.

Slowly, he nodded. "Yeah, I got reasons. I lay awake nights thinkin' of them. Thinkin' uh seein' my pap, uh bullet in his stummick. Someday, I'm goin' to meet th' coyote thet done it." Tumble gripped the butt of his hip-holstered gun, hard.

"He might be dead."

Tumble touched his breast. "I got uh feelin' in here thet says he ain't. But someday—he will—be!"

"Ride. . ." Lilith would have said more, evidently. But she caught herself. Tumble nodded briefly and brushed past her. He swung into the saddle and rode hard in the direction Bud had gone.

Lilith watched him top a rise and drop from sight. Then, lips curling, she finished. "Ride; you liar."

Keeping in the back far enough so as not to be seen, she also rode toward Crazyman Coulee. She was tired; dog tired. But the end would justify the means. All night she had ridden, taking the little herd of the dead homesteader from a box canyon and hazing it over on Broadus range.

AHEAD of her, Tumble pulled up. He dismounted and led his horse into a wash, following up the bed of a wet-weather creek on foot. It was getting cold now. A misty rain had commenced dropping and snow was falling higher in the mountains. Tumble stuck his right hand under his jacket. Gunhand: Had to keep it warm.

He came out of the stream bed and crawled on his belly to a tangled maze of chokecherries. Below him, at the edge of a heavy stand of timber that covered the slope beyond, three men faced each other over a smoldering branding fire. Tumble came to his feet and bent low, working his way down the slope through the heavy brush. Voices came to him as he neared: loud; angry. Someone was telling someone else just how the cow ate the cabbage.

Now, he was near enough to distinguish one voice from another. And the tones of the three caused Tumble to drag his iron and crouch, ready to spring, there in the brush.

"So it's true." Bud's voice was bitter. "I knew you weren't as straight as you should've been. I had no room to kick, though. My dad wasn't so narrow-walking himself. But murderers! You killed old Dooley. . . ."

"Shut it up!"

Eff Broadus, flat-faced, mean as they came, stepped nearer to the trembling, white-faced Bud. George, taking none of his mother's character, a second and younger edition of his father, also stepped closer and to one side.

"Sure, we swung a long loop," Eff barked. "But don't accuse us of murder. These homeless critters was right here where we found 'em. We're brandin' 'em. But we didn't kill Dooley. Another pop like that an' you catch lead in your gut. See?"

"Yep," George seconded. "I ain't so cravin' of you as a brother-in-law nohow. What Phenie sees . . ."

"Liars! Murderers!" Bud spat. Tumble admired the boy. He had no chance to beat this pair in a gun battle. And if he did, he'd lose the girl he loved.

Tumble crept up through the brush, parted a few vines and looked out. Rigid, like graven images, they crouched, elbows crooked, ready for one man to make a move. Tumble started straightening slowly. The move gave him full view of old Eff Broadus.

A strange, croaking sound rattled Tumble's throat. He whetted his lips, flexed his biceps in an effort to stop the shaking of his hands.

Great Lord, did such things really happen? For here was the skunk Tumble had in his mind for years; hoping, never really expecting to find.

"Buzzard. Rio Buzzard!"

The grated words seemed to strike Eff Broadus like blows with the flat of a heavy hand. His head jerked up, his mouth fell slack. Out of a dim past came a name; his name, when Rangers tailed him and other outlaws scurried from his path.

Slowly, Eff Broadus turned. Tumble stood at the edge of the timber, hands hanging straight at his sides. Eff glared at him, cocked his head oddly to one side, as if trying to figure this out.

"Rio Buzzard. . . . Remember Dan Lantree? Yes, yuh scum, yuh remember him. Well, I'm Wally Lantree, th' cub yuh forgot to kill. Grab yuh gun, you, an' yuh whelp. I'm smearin' yuh—wipin' yuh out. Draw—"

"Ai!" Half wail, half curse, the cry that rolled from the throat of Eff Broadus. His movements were smooth as he flashed his hands to his guns. No less gun-wise and swift were the moves of George. Bud Gayle was caught flat-footed; he wasn't in this at all.

It seemed to his fascinated eyes that here was the peak of gun-speed. Slap; shush of guns on leather; death clack of drawing hammers. Din and hell and smoke of flaming Colts.

A blending roll. Wally Lantree, now the roving officer and gunman known as Tumble Weed, stood leaned to one side. His hip-holstered gun was now in his right hand, held a bit out from his hip. The shorter .44 was in his left hand, held almost chin high, spitting viciously.

Two jets of dust spurted out of the dirty coat George wore. Eff's face seemed blotted out in a red spume. Gunsmoke hung heavy in the damp, cold air. Didn't seem they fell, but there they were. Eff, face down, stretched flat out. George, also on his face, hands clenched beside his face, left leg drawn strangely under him.

Like a man treading deep sand, Tumble came slowly forward. George stirred; he raised his head. "We didn't—kill Dooley."

"They didn't," Tumble intoned. "I b'lieve thet. Men in thet shape don't lie." Suddenly, he turned to Bud.

"They's uh girl thet'll be a-needin' yuh, button."

"T-thanks," Bud swallowed hard.

"So you'd turn to his side, too, would you? All right, just make a move to go to that Broadus wench, Bud. And you—you double-crossing spy—say your prayers."

Tumble looked around. Standing in the edge of the timber, gun in a steady hand, her face a mask of rage, stood Lilith, the mother of demons sure enough. She thumbed back the hammer and pointed the gun straight at Tumble.

V

"JACK FALL sent you."

It was a flat statement; not an accusation at all. And looking at the woman, Tumble knew it would be no use to deny anything. She wouldn't believe it. And he read death in her eyes.

Here was a woman who had been hard-surfaced by taking hard knocks; a young woman who had taken a man's place and a man's idea and mixed them with many of her own. She needed someone to shield her and to run things for her. But it seemed she had gone too far, had ruled too long.

No doubt she loved her brother but was too blind to see she was hurting him. All she could see was that she had been right about the Broadus clan. Figured she was right all up and down the line. And she was afraid of Jack Fall; afraid he would some day overrule her and take her.

"Jack Fall sent you to play my game, and twist it his way," Lilith muttered darkly. "You did. All right. You know I can shoot. I'm not asking anything. Draw your gun. . . . Oh!"

She swayed, raised her right hand and stared dumbly at the blood that dripped from the tips of her fingers. "Oh-h," she moaned again, swaying. Bud sprang forward to catch her. After all, she was a woman. A woman, but Tumble breathed a sight easier, even as he ducked and muttered at the slug that lifted his hat from his head. The spang of a rifle, higher in the timber, carried heavy on the wet air.

Several tufts of wet ground flew up around them. Tumble emptied his six-gun at the timber, holstered it and ran to Bud, who was holding Lilith up and trying to rush her away to their horses. Tumble grabbed her arm. No more shots came their way. But a loud, jeering voice came down the wind to them.

"Steal our beef will yuh—yuh rustlers. Do yuh own killin'. That's from Jack Fall!"

They gained their horses. By now, Lilith had recovered from the shock. As the unseen man yelled at them, Lilith's face flooded with color and she bit her lips. The expression on her face was not lost on Tumble, either.

A mile away, in a protecting draw, Tumble called a halt.

"Ride on," Lilith snapped. "I'm all right."

"Git off thet hoss. Git off, or I'll drag yuh off."

Surprised, startled, Lilith instinctively reined in. And Bud, despite the fact he was worried about Phenie and also his

sister, could not help grinning covertly at Tumble. Tumble's face was inscrutable, but his blue eyes twinkled. He moved swiftly.

He jerked off the girl's coat and rolled up her shirt sleeve. A jagged, shallow tear in the fleshy part of her arm had already stopped bleeding. Without a word, Tumble yanked the sleeve of her shirt off and bound it about the arm, then helped her put her coat back on.

During it all, Lilith said nothing. When she was in the saddle again, she looked hard and long at Tumble. "That's man stuff," she finally said. "I like it. Even it you are Jack Fall's man and crossed me up. But why make that play you did?"

"Yuh was hidin' thereabouts," Tumble shrugged. "Yuh seen an' heard. Yuh seen Eff Broadus—once th' Rio Buzzard—when I called him. Thet wasn't no lie. I got th' devil thet I bin hopin' to git so long. An' his whelp."

"Phenie's better off," Bud offered.

"Forget that. . . ."

"Don't say it, Lilith," the boy almost snarled. "I've had all off you I'm going to have. I'm going to her. Then, I'm going to get the devil that shot at you and the rest of us."

"You'll get your dear side-in, Jack Fall, then," Lilith snapped. "And don't bring that—that girl—on my ranch."

"I'll bring her just there. It's part my ranch. You'll stand it, too. I'm taking clips off a real man, and faring fine. You said you liked man stuff. All right, have some."

BUD wheeled his horse and rode off. Lilith sat silent, staring through the mist. Then, a queer, half smile curved her lips. "At last," she muttered, "he's showing some stomach."

"An' seein' as he's gone, who helped yuh drive them nester steers on th' Broadus place?" Tumble demanded suddenly. "Yuh knew they wouldn't miss th' chance to slap irons on them."

It was a shrewd question.

Lilith shrugged wearily. "Nobody helped me. I drove them out of the rough hills on Smothered Creek last night. And it looks like I failed, in a way."

"Yes? An' who was it claimin' them?"

"I don't know." Lilith looked away.

"Yuh do."

"An if I do? You've finished your trail, gunhand. You crossed me up, and led Bud to a woman I hate. Hate, because I know that when he marries her, I'll lose my grip on Bud, and I'll no longer rule entire over Scarab ranch. That's Jack Fall's doing. He wanted it so because he figured I'd give in to him when that happened."

Tumble touched his horse with his spurs and they rode slowly toward the ranch. "Yuh know I ain't with Jack Fall," he spoke at length. "An' I got business knowin' who held them steers an' stuff yuh hazed in to bait uh trap with."

"I tell you, I don't know." She refused to look at him.

"Lilith, yuh mebbe don't know, but yuh got an idee. Yuh ain't half so hard as yuh pretend, lady. Down underneath, yuh're all woman. An' I don't think yuh hate Jack Fall as much as yuh pretend! All right, I'll ask Jack Fall."

"I—I don't think he'd shoot at me," Lilith muttered.

"I've knowed men to crease uh wild hoss they wanted real bad, an' made uh play at." Cryptically.

Lilith's head suddenly came up. "Bunk," she snapped. "He's jealous. Jealous of you, Tumble. And tried to kill us. . . ."

"Ain't no right to be thet."

"Don't," she looked at him speculatively, "be so sure, gunhand."

Tumble felt like digging in his spurs and riding away from there. But he couldn't. He said nothing more until they sighted the buildings of the ranch. Abruptly, he pulled up. "I'll be leavin' yuh, ma'm," he said sharply.

Lilith spoke deliberately.

"Finished your work, have you? Well, you've done enough. But—I don't want you to leave. Stay here. Some day perhaps . . ." she looked away from him, color flamed in her cheeks.

Tumble had the feel of a maverick, about the time six riatas settle on him all to once. He shook his head like a bee was flying around his ears. "Nope, I can't nowise stick. Two reasons. One, I had uh piece uh luck back there. Th' other. . . . Well, th' United States land outfit would sure admire to know who it

is makin' homesteads so awful unhealthy in these parts.

"An' me, I'm findin' out, pronto. I know it ain't you. Th' Broadus bunch, some. They won't trouble no more. But they's somebody else. Fall, he spoke uh gunnies on th' range. I'm seein'. Adios."

A wave of his hand and Tumble rode back the way they'd come. Lilith sighed. Wearily, chin on her breast, she rode her way. "I knew there was something else," she muttered. "It—it's a shame. Jack. . . . I'm not so sure, now."

Lilith Gayle had begun to crack. Something assured her that no one would ever hobble this roving gunman-officer from the Southwest. Yet something stirred within her when she thought of him. At the same time, she knew she loved Jack Fall. Just too stubborn to give in to anyone; that was the way she had been. Lilith, suddenly cold, sobbed. She looked back. Tumble was riding over the skyline, cutting across toward the Crescent J. If it was Jack. . . .

VI

TUMBLE, however, didn't go to the Crescent J. He dropped over a rise and cut directly back toward Crazyman Coulee. The rain had changed to sleet now. It piled up in slushy, half-freezing puddles and bounced off the broad, bowed shoulders of the solitary horseman.

Tumble was thinking. Not of what the end of this trail might bring, but what lay still farther beyond that. For years, he had followed the trail of the hell-raiser; always fighting on the side of the law, always riding on when that trouble was settled. But now, the game had lost flavor. Broadus: that trail had run out. Tumble felt at peace on that score. He'd always sort of known that some day, if he roved long enough and far enough, he'd run across Broadus.

The sleet changed to wet snow. Winter was coming down upon the high Montana ranges. He closed his eyes sleepily, an almost instinctive sign that he was ready for trouble. Tall sahuaros and prickly pear; the green waters of the Rio Grande in New Mexico; the sluggish, yellow Rio Grande of Texas. Mesquites and liveoaks. He was back in the Southwest again. Rangers. . . .

"It'll be th' Rangers, hoss. Señoritas an' tequila an' men who don't talk much, an' wimmen who ain't half saint an' half devil. Either one or t'other. Hoss, it's cold. Our double-rig an' our leather chaps ain't made for this. An' I never could wear them goat-hide britches. 'Member how we like to froze in Nevada?"

Carefully, he rode down toward the spot where Eff and George Broadus had bet their all, and lost. Carefully, carbine across the pommel, he studied the two fresh mounds moodily. Whoever it was that had shot at them had buried the two. Tumble sighed, then followed tracks. He felt better when he saw that none of them led toward the Broadus place, for it had occurred to him that Bud might run into trouble.

Sleepily, as if he had ages to accomplish his aims, he rode the trail of the cattle of the murdered nester of Smothered Creek. "Poor pilgrims," he muttered once when he stopped to roll a smoke. "Gov'ment says here's yuh little patch. They takes it, an' ain't really hurtin'. Then, somebody says no—an' th' pilgrim dies. An' then, somebody knows me, an' I gits uh job. Well, I'll finish her."

He cussed the snow that got on his neck and melted down his collar. All afternoon he rode the trail. The trail of five men and a pitiful little herd. What he would find at the end, he had an idea. Higher in the foothills, at the beginning of the bench range, Carl Nation had his Double-Circle-Cross spread. And gunmen; they'd be up in there if they were really on the range.

Jack Fall said that Nation had quit him to go rustling. Tumble wondered if that were so. It seemed pretty thin. Still, it might hold water.

Toward dark, Tumble pulled up. He slipped out of the saddle and bent low to the ground. Two horsemen had joined in with the men he was following. Tumble clucked his tongue thoughtfully, then went ahead on foot, angling across a side-hill, spruce and brush covered.

A mile, and he stopped again. Two horsemen had cut out of the bunch. Tumble left his horse and followed their trail for a hundred yards. "Huh," he grunted, stopping and looking out over the flat range below him. "Two hombres join in,

mebbe wau-wau some, then cut out. An' they angles yonderly, in th' d'rection uh Jack Fall's Crescent J. Mister Fall owns th' saloon in town. He could git gunnies easy, without havin' them to his spread."

He took up the trail once more. It grew dark and the fall of snow increased. Tumble rode over the crest of a timbered ridge and dropped down onto flat grass range, sparsely timbered. Ahead of him, a steer bawled. He passed the dark forms of cattle. A light shone dimly through the night. He dismounted, tied his horse to a pine, and went cautiously forward on foot.

Light streamed out the door of a cabin that sat against a sheer break in the hill beyond. Brush and evergreens grew close around the place. Crouched in the snow, Tumble watched. He saw the man who'd opened the door go back in, arms loaded with wood. The door closed. Tumble arose, drew his gun and ran forward.

Unnoticed, hair-triggered to the point where a sound would have started his guns flaming, he leaned against the cabin side and caught his breath. Then, slowly, almost lazily and indifferently, he worked around the place. A tiny beam of light speared out from an unchinked section of the logs. Tumble pushed back his sombrero and squinted inside.

FROM description, he recognized Carl Nation, the gorilla-like, long-armed man who tilted back in a chair by the red Yukon stove, a jelly glass of whiskey in one hand, the other hand near his gun. There were Jerd Gymoe, funeral-faced and double-ironed, and Chell Taber, bald-headed and buzzard-necked. Two killers that Tumble knew; killers known from Mexico to Canada. His palms itched. Hell's heritage boiled within him.

He wanted to test his gun-wizardry against them: Silk Salk, meticulously dressed, packing two guns, and Lupe Bodett, scar-faced, with a low-swung gun at one thigh, a razor-sharp Bowie knife at the other.

Tumble fairly ached, wanted to fling open the door, yell his challenge and then cut loose his wolf. But he knew better. Crack gundogs, all of them. No one man could hope to stand against them, no matter how much magic he carried in his holsters.

Tumble drew back. Nation was speaking. The shivering gunman outside put his ear to the crack and listened hard.

"Yuh said yuh could shoot a rifle, didn't yuh, Chell? Yeah, an' yuh take uh pot at that Wally Lantree gunnie, callin' hisse'f Tumble Weed, an' hit th' woman. Say . . ."

"I was cold and they was movin' around," Chell growled.

"Yeah. Well, yuh'll get lots colder, all of yuh. An' yuh'll move around more. Broadus is wiped out now. We'll take over his place, natu'lly, an' . . ."

"How about that girl of his?" Jerd Gymoe demanded.

"That yellow-striped Bud Gayle'll pick her up. Later, when we busts down on this Scarab outfit an' rips them wide open, we'll pick her up with that other she-devil. That one'll take a lot of tamin'."

"Reckon yer know who kin do it, eh?" Lupe jeered.

Nation only growled. Tumble stood outside and shivered. But not from the cold, this time. Shivered because he was fighting himself to keep from plunging in there and having it out.

"Reckon that Lilith wildcat sees her brother bein' strung up like we did ol' Dooley, she'll come to time, huh?" Nation spoke again.

Then, Tumble was backing away. He couldn't trust himself, and this was certainly no time to commit suicide. Away from the cabin, he turned and ran to his horse. He hunkered in the brush, built a damp, knobby quirly and managed a few whiffs of welcome smoke. He was arguing with himself; plenty.

It looked like Jack Fall was back of it all. That shot hadn't been meant for Lilith, it had been for himself. And Nation and his gun-hound pack intended sweeping Scarab, carrying off Lilith and Phenie Broadus, if she were there. They'd spoken of someone taming Lilith. Who—but Jack Fall?

And by their own tongues, they had told Tumble who it was had been responsible for homesteader deaths. Tumble forked his tired horse and rode toward the Crescent J. He was going to see Jack Fall, going to strike at the head of this business, if he had to trail Fall on into town among his men. Then, he'd figure a way

to smear the rest of the bunch. Calling for help did not occur to him, nor would it have appealed to him had it occurred. Hell's heritage, the lust to put such hellions under the sod. . . .

Suddenly, Tumble stopped and wheeled his horse around. His gun flashed in the ghostly snow-light of the night. A ways back of him, he thought he saw a dark shadow moving. He fired, his shots rolling and thundering through the night. A loud curse, but no answering shots. Hoofbeats, rapid, muffled in the snow carpet. Silence.

VII

UNMOVING, ears strained to catch the dying sounds of the other rider, Tumble was part of the landscape itself. Now, only the strange, muffled purr of the snow reached his ears. Still he sat and listened. Again the soft, distant thud of hoofs. Whoever it was he'd taken a shot at; whoever it had been following him, and not caring to swap lead, had ridden hard and wide, and was now in front of him. In front of him, and heading toward Crescent J!

Sleepily, like a waiting puma, smiling thinly to himself, Tumble rode forward. He couldn't quite figure this all out. If it was one of the gang Nation had with him, why hadn't they let him have it, there at the cabin, since, if they followed, they must have known he was there? Too deep for Tumble to bother with. He thought of only one thing now. And that was to face Jack Fall.

Yes; Jack Fall was key man.

The wind sprang up and drove hard snow particles at hard and stinging angles. It mourned wolfishly down the draw and howled a dirge across the flat grassland. Fine night for a showdown, Tumble reflected. And he had that seeming sixth sense of a gunman that warns of impending trouble.

Lights winked through the bluster of the night. Tumble slipped from the saddle beside a deserted corral and made his way on foot toward the stables that loomed ghostly in the night. Crescent J ranch buildings sat on a mile-wide flat and the wind sweeping in cut like icy knives. In the lee of the stable, Tumble stomped up and down and beat his hands furiously against his sides.

Then, half crouched, moving sleepily and deliberately, he went on to the house and softly upon the porch. He stopped to be sure his guns were ready to leap into his hands. His fingers started to curl around the doorknob. The door was opened swiftly. Grinning, bowing mockingly, Jack Fall made a sweeping gesture and invited him to enter.

Lamplight spread across the snow.

"Got uh cake baked?" Tumble throttled his surprise and chagrin and came up, outwardly unperturbed.

"No, but we knew you were coming," Fall answered. "I knew you were coming here to see me. I set out liquor. Cold out isn't it?"

"But she might warm up," Tumble observed almost absently.

"Yes, it just might warm up," Fall nodded agrement. His face was all poker style, his manner that of the casual, genial host.

He said, "You found tracks of two horses, cutting into a trail and cutting out of it. You scouted a cabin on the Double-Circle-Cross."

"An' some hombre was trailin' me. Jest got in an' bin gone from th' room only uh little spell." Tumble stooped and picked up a piece of hard, boot-tracked snow from the floor, then tossed it away indifferently.

Tumble was thinking hard. Right now, no doubt, men with guns were standing out in the other room, waiting to plug him. He . . .

"Heres' to a man I misjudged; a man who was faithful to a woman who needed a faithful man. A man I admire for being straight—and hate because the woman I love loves him!"

Tumble blinked at the toast Fall was proposing. Well, at least he was honest to a certain extent. Tumble picked up his glass and stared straight at Fall.

"Yuh found I was honest by havin' uh man trail me. I found uh woman who needed some man to jest find out how to treat her. But women ain't for me." Tumble hesitated. Somehow, a feeling of doubt as to just how Jack Fall stood crept into his mind. He raised his glass once more.

"Here's to uh hombre," he proposed, "who loved uh lady so much he had uh bunch uh wolves kidnap her, an' didn't

have sense enough to know what they'd do. Here's to uh man who tastes his last likker . . .

"Drink it down, yuh polecat, an' feel some lead in yuh guts!"

It seemed that Fall staggered back from a blow in the face. His mouth opened wide and a hoarse gasp wheezed from his throat. Tumble studied the man with mixed feelings and decisions.

"Th-they've kidnaped Lilith?" Fall suddenly roared.

IF this was acting, it was mighty fine acting. But it struck Tumble that it couldn't be acting. He leaned forward from the hips, his frosty eyes fairly burning. "No, they ain't, yet. But they was aimin' to carry out yuh plans, Fall. Aimin' to kind uh smear th' Scarab an' take her off, like yuh ordered. I heard Nation yammerin', tonight."

"It's a lie," Fall snarled. "You're trying to hatch up something. You tramp gunman, you think I'll get killed, fighting off that Nation and his gunmen and you'll have clear sailing with Lilith. What business have you coming in here and . . ."

"Government business, mister," Tumble drawled. "Homesteader killin's an' th' like. Sabe? I had another little chore, an' finished it."

"I saw it," Fall grunted. "That's how I let my tracks run into that trail. Since you're an agent of the gov . . . No, never mind the papers. I haven't called you a liar, have I? Anyhow, I followed Nation after you had that brush with them. Finally swung into their trail. Happened to glimpse you coming, far behind, and dropped off the trail. Let my foreman circle, get back of you and watch you while you watched Nation.

"I wasn't sure what your game was, but I was watching Lilith's interests. Naturally, you weren't shouting your business here. Well, do I get the blame for those killings, and running the homesteaders off?"

Tumble seemed talking to himself. "Broadus an' his son was small russlers; mebbe-so sort uh helpin' Nation out some. They was some guilty, but they been convicted. So thet leaves Nation, who done said they killed them homesteaders." Suddenly, he turned on Fall.

"If yuh ain't really headin' an' backin' Nation's bunch, git yuh men an' come on."

"Because Nation once worked for me you think I ramrod that outlaw spread. And because you want Lilith . . . I don't give a hoot if you are a government some-sort-of-detective, you want me to get in on the kill. All right, I'll do it."

"An' I don't want them all killed, neither," Tumble remarked pointedly. "Dead men can't say who was leader. I'll ride behind. . . ."

"Until it's over. Then, Mister Gunman, you and I have it out. Some ways, I admire you. Others . . . Well, you said something about treating Lilith right. I'll treat her to a dead killer."

" 'Fraid she couldn't use yuh very well if yuh was dead," Tumble grinned crookedly. Fall hesitated, and then grinned wryly back.

"We'll see," he said simply. "Yes, we'll see."

He walked to the door and yelled. Yelled out again. The bunkhouse door opened and someone answered. Fall turned back to Tumble. "You see, I trusted you being man enough that I didn't have a trap set for you, or men watching you. Try to do as well."

"Mebbe better," Tumble shrugged.

He poured himself another small drink and half closed his eyes, looking over the half dozen punchers that trooped in from the bunkhouse. Hard hombres, they were: fighters as well as riders, the sort that couldn't be considered as gunmen, exactly, but wouldn't hesitate to take chips in any man's game.

"Any you hairpins want to stay here; that's all right," Fall said as he finished telling them why he'd called them. He waited, lazily. Tumble leaned against the table in the center of the room and sipped his whiskey. The men looked at Fall, then at each other. Finally, one called Whitey spoke.

"Guess we might's well ride," he said. calmly. "Reckon we're all tired bein' called rustlers an' killers. We bin wonderin', boss, when yuh'd wipe out Nation an' his nest o' skunks. Some of us ain't fergittin' how he done us afore he stopped pertendin' an' quit this spread."

Fall cast Tumble a sidewise, meaning glance. Tumble pretended to yawn. "Don't

forgit I want one, at least, alive," he muttered.

Fall grunted and led the way out. Saddle leather creaked coldly; men's mutterings were hurled back into their teeth as the wind howled down upon them. Heads down, they rode toward the foothills, stormy children of the wild storm.

In the very rear, a sleepy-looking Texas hombre watched them all. He felt better, trusted Fall more. In fact, he rather liked Fall. Then, Tumble shook his head. He knew Fall meant it when he said they'd look through smoke. And Fall was fast. And where the woman was concerned, Tumble knew Fall wouldn't back up one inch.

Well, that was for some time later. Right now, something else. Guns loaded for rustler, renegade meat, the silent bunch trailed on.

HALF an hour until daylight; fifty yards from the cabin beneath the cliff. But how far in time and distance until death?

They crouched, gasping for breath in the cold wind. A faint tinge of gray was showing in the east. Up above the cabin, a match flared suddenly, and died as suddenly as the wind puffed it out. Men up there were set.

"Haven't orders to shoot unless you have to," Fall mumbled, recalling Tumble's words of a moment before. "How about . . ."

"That Broadus business was personal. An' they clawed for their irons," Tumble finished Fall's question and answered it at the same time. Meaningly, "I always shoots faster when things is personal. An' when it's all foolishness . . ." Tumble shrugged.

They walked carefully forward toward the cabin. No sign of life yet. The rest stayed behind, rifles ready to blast out death should anyone try to break away from the place. They stopped by the door. Tumble tensed. Just the faintest movement inside: a clicking sound.

"Somebody," he put his mouth close to Fall's ear and whispered, "has saw us, an' their idee is to play fox an' let us come in through th' door. They aim to mow us down. Sabe?"

Fall nodded, and his expression seemed to ask Tumble what would they do about it.

"Well, we'll walk right in, nohow," Tumble grinned.

Despite himself, Fall could not help but shiver at the drawn, bleak look on Tumble's face. Before Fall could speak, Tumble howled: the wild, wavering hackle-raising wail of the gray timber skulker. The result was all that could have been desired. The two men above the cabin braced their feet against two heavy boulders and shoved them out over the edge. A rending crash, and one slammed through the shake roof; the other one hit the chimney and crashed it over in a shower of stone.

"Ai-yeeeee!" Tumble hurled himself against the door and flung himself into the gloomy interior of the cabin. Instantaneous and short-lived hell and blazes and din of death broke loose.

A SPRAWLED figure lay on the floor, gruesome. The boulder crashing through the roof had taken toll. The rest of the gunmen in the place were in a state of confusion. A moment before, they had waited, grinning in the dawn-light at each other, lying in wait for those outside to come on. Then, sudden death from above. Clouds of dust, and a leaping, swaying, triggering tornado was in among them. Whirlwind from Texas. Merciless. No quarter asked or given.

Chell Taber kneeled on his bunk and raised his gun. Jerd Gymoe crouched in a corner and thumbed back the hammer of his Colts. Deadly, straight lines of red tongued out at them from two guns; once more, and again. Another gun roared in Tumble's ears. Hardly realizing it, he saw Carl Nation draw himself up full height, then crash forward on his face. He heard Jack Fall yell.

Tumble wheeled. Lupe Bodett leaped out the door and sprinted away. Hope spread a wide, fantastic grin across his face. And then . . . Lupe left his feet, spun in the air and came down, a flopping, limp thing devoid of life. A half dozen rifles had done their work well, and final.

Silk Salk cowered by the stove, his hands above his head. He swallowed hard, looked at Chell, sprawled on his own bunk, and at Jerd, squatted on his haunches in the corner, chin on his breast, crimson staining the floor about him. Gruesome,

Silk whimpered, then looked pleadingly at Tumble.

The men outside crowded the door, looked in, shook their heads and stayed out. The attitude of those inside . . . the hour . . . the storm. . . .

They preferred the cold.

Tumble bent above Silk Salk and yanked him to his feet. The gunman's lips drew back from his teeth. He'd begged for mercy, but he was still a rat. His lips twitched.

"What did Fall have to do with this?" Tumble demanded.

"He was the fall-guy. Was to get blamed for it all. That's all. I. . . ."

Suddenly, Salk jerked back. Just Fall and Tumble in the cabin; it was his chance. A derringer tumbled from his sleeve, his face worked crazily. His croak of joy was chopped short and drowned out by the roar of two guns. He grunted once, staggered back, tripped and fell flat, and lay still.

Rat to the end.

Fall was swaying and holding his hand to his head. Tumble caught him. "Creased by thet popgun," he muttered angrily. "Well, anyhow, it sure saves botherin' with prisoners."

Fall grunted and held a handkerchief to his head. "Never mind that," he barked. "We've settled our common quarrel. Now, fellow, I'm tossing in my hand. You win."

"Nope," Tumble shook his head. "I don't. I told yuh she really loved you."

"Wrong. And you can't go off . . ."

Tumble chuckled. "I'll prove it, Fall," he declared. "Put yuh sombrero on so's none yuh men can see yuh head's bin creased. We're ridin' to Scarab, an' I'll be showin' yuh how it is. We're fightin' it out. Listen . . ."

VIII

PACING the floor in her room, Lilith Gayle watched gray daylight strengthen; watched the wind die and the snow start in to wobble down again. Her brain, it seemed, refused to function. She had started slipping; losing her man-sized grip on things. Had been, ever since Bud had ridden back from town, late the night before, announcing that Phenie Broadus was now his wife and would stay there.

The girl had none of the traits of her father and brother. Delicate, in a healthy sort of way, and pretty. She looked at Lilith, and the man-woman caved. She snuggled the other girl, but little younger than herself, into her arms a moment; then flung off to her own room.

Haggard, all woman now, she looked out over the snow-covered range and at the foothills and mountains beyond, dim, wavering, in the curtain of snow. Out there, some place, were two men. One, a man who had inherited the hell of a gun-yanking, frontier-lawing parent. But now that he'd run a long trail of blood vengeance to its blind end, was it too much to hope he'd settle? Somehow, the woman knew he never would.

Like the wild stallions whistling defiance from the rimrock, free as the great, gray honkers of the autumn, clean and untrammeled as the breath of juniper and the great elk: that was Tumble Weed, or Wally Lantree. Somehow, his adopted name suited him so much better.

On the other hand, there was Jack Fall. Kindly, loving, and loving her. A man; a clean, real man. It seemed she had always loved him a bit. Only, she was too filled with the wine of power over a great ranch, and the men that peopled it, to submit. . . .

Now which? And which one lay dead, out there in the storm?

"Fool!" she branded herself. A swift, pantherish move, and she was across the room, whipping her heavy gun from the holster that hung on the wall. Like the thoroughbred she was, she trembled. A choked sob. She hurled the gun away.

"I'm not that much of a coward," she cried.

Again she pressed her face to the cold window pane, and then pressed her hands to her breast. Dark, snow-mantled riders came out of the fog of snow. Wide-eyed, she scanned their faces as they dismounted. A whimpering cry, and she flung herself from the room and out to meet them.

Something in Jack Fall's manner, the killer-gleam in Tumble Weed's eyes, stopped her. The back of her clenched hand went to her mouth.

"Lilith," Tumble spoke, "I'm puttin' you on a show."

"Stop it," Fall blurted. "You try to

handicap yourself. I'll not stand for it!"

Tumble growled at him. Lilith took a step backward. Tumble went on:

"Fall says yuh love him, an' I says yuh're mine," he said.

A GLEAM of hope flamed in Lilith's eyes. For a moment, Tumble was almost lost. A home . . . A real, man's woman . . . Then, he visioned long, sun-beaten, windswept trails along the Rio Grande. Trails bristling with guns. The blue and gold badge of that body of honest-to-God-men: The Texas Rangers. And he saw a plain, tumble-weeds rolling, free and umbridled, before the winds of chance. Hell's heritage warmed his fighting blood. There was still history to be made, and skunks that must be killed.

"Fall an' me, we're shootin' her out."

"No," Lilith gasped.

"Hell—an' yes," Tumble grunted. "Ready, Fall? Yeah?"

"No—*nonono!*" Lilith pleaded. "You can't do this."

"We're doin' it, ma'am," Tumble was mocking. Fall nodded agreement.

The girl seemed paralyzed. Dimly, she saw them step apart; dimly, she saw them turn, arms crooked at the elbows, sombreros shoved back from their faces.

Jack Fall was fast. But this roving gunman-officer was lightning steeped in grease. It was murder, Lilith raised one hand in weak protest, gulped, and tried to speak. She saw them both, strangely. Saw Tumble flip a magic gun from a holster; conjure another .44 from a springed shoulder holster. She saw him fire, just as Jack Fall's guns were coming up.

Fall staggered, spun, then dropped.

Tumble stood there, crouched. Lilith pressed her hands to her face. She looked at the fallen man, then at the victor. Deliberately, Tumble sneered at her. Lilith went white. He was mocking her; mocking them all.

"J-Jack!" she screamed, and ran to drop on her knees beside the fallen man. Tumble grinned, reached up and took a quirly from his pocket, lit it, then swung into the saddle.

Lilith raised Jack Fall's head. He opened his eyes. Suddenly, Lilith smacked his face, jumped up and stepped back. "Men are fools," she cried. "That wound is several hours old. And Tumble Weed wasn't the sort to miss."

"I—I'm sorry, Lilith," Jack said, getting to his feet. "It was his idea. He didn't believe you loved him; said you loved me."

"Then—all men—aren't fools," she muttered.

She turned to Fall and came close, smiling up at him. "I loved you both," she said simply. "But I think, now, I love you best. You understand?"

"I do," Fall nodded. "I hope you always love him, in a way. The range is clear, it's peaceful. And he brought me the woman I love."

They looked after the dim figure riding away from them.

"He rolls before the storm," Lilith murmured.

"And when he turns?" Fall questioned.

Lilith threw back her head and laughed happily. She said, "The storm just naturally turns, and runs right back the other way. Adios," she waved her arm, "gunhand . . ."

"Adios . . ."

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Twelve hours to pay. . . . Twelve hours to push that wave of hoof-gold to Del Rio. And not one spare minute to detour a big brand's Colt-barrier.

BUD SAMPSON roweled his roan up to the head of the strung-out column of Bar-B steers that he was driving to Del Rio. A slitted glance he whipped at the stout piñon post set in the middle of the trail. Four strands of barbed wire stretched on each side of it until they were lost among the undulating sage-brush hills.

"Bob wire!" the young cowboy-rancher exclaimed. "When did 'Snake' Stinson get so almighty powerful that he kin fence off the Morgan trail!"

As he spoke the horse's flanks almost grazed the barbed strands. One of Bud's bone handled .45's leaped into his hand. Four times it barked. So fast clicked the hammer of the triggerless gun that the reports blended to sound like a single shot. He leaned down from the saddle and folded the broken strands back against the next post. Quickly he rounded up his scattered cattle and pointed them for the gap in the wire fence.

"Hi-yi-yippity-yi!" he yelled. "Roll along, little doggies. We got to drift into Del Rio 'fore the banks puts up the bars."

Scarcely was Bud's herd half a mile within the far-flung, forbidden Box-S range, when five riders swept over a low rise to the left of him, reined up in a cloud of yellow dust.

"Snake" Stinson, himself, was in front, wizened, thin faced, beak nosed. Malevolently he glared at the trespasser out of small, close-set black eyes. Beside the cattleman rode his foreman, Joe Beers, thick chested, neckless, bullet headed, as unsavory in appearance as in reputation.

"Here—what you mean?" demanded Stinson, thin colorless lips drawn to a sneering line beneath the scraggy fringe of mustache. "Runnin' yore stock on my land!"

Bud's eyes narrowed.

"Yore land?" Bud repeated slowly, fighting back the torrent of rage. "When did you get title to it?"

A twisted smile warped the paper-thin lips of the big brand owner. "Got her leased from the State of New Mexico, if you wanter know. You nesters an' small fry has got to git."

"Well, if you figger you kin make me git by hemmin' me in with bob wire, why I reckon I'll have to buy me a pair of cutters."

Old Stinson chose to ignore that. "You rustle them cows off of my range pronto, or I'll throw the whole bunch in pound at a dollar a head."

"Let's do it, anyhow," put in Beers. "Make him pay fer sp'ilin' that there fence."

"It won't be the first time my cows has been put in Box-S corrals." Bud spoke carelessly, but beneath his easy manner was a cougar-like watchfulness. Inches from the brace of gun butts slung low on his thigh hovered his outstretched fingers. Beneath the challenge in his steady gray eyes the Box-S riders shifted in their saddles, waited to take their boss' lead.

But Stinson had swapped lead with a Sampson once before. "I ain't impoundin' 'em this time," he snarled out of the corner of his mouth, "but if you drive them cows a foot fu'ther 'cross my range, I'll shoot 'em down like jack rabbits. Every head."

A dead smile flashed over Bud's set lips. "You got the odds this time, Stinson. But I'm gettin' my cows through to Del Rio, an' I'm payin' off my mortgage to yore bank—today."

"Mebbeso," sneered Stinson. A crafty gleam crept in his little black eyes. "But I'm thinkin' different, Sampson. I need that section of yores, an' I'm gettin' it. This ain't no country fer small fry. Like I told old Rufe Sampson before he died—"

But at the expression that had suddenly narrowed the eyes of Rufe Sampson's son, Stinson clamped his jaws shut, turned his horse. "We'll be watchin' you," he warned, "over the sights of Winchesters." Followed by his hirelings, he rode away.

Heavy was Bud's heart and bitter his thoughts, as he bunched his cattle and herded them back through the gap in the wire fence. Payment of the $1,500 mortgage that Stinson, through his bank at Del Rio, held on Bud's ranch, must be met today. The herd of fifty steers was his payment.

BY way of the old Morgan trail, up which thousands upon thousands of longhorns had traveled northward from the Texas prairies, Del Rio was little more than half a day's cow walk. But now he was forced to make the drive far to the south, through the rocky barrens of the Deception River country, and to pass through the corner of the dread Red Desert at this season of the year a blazing inferno. As far as he knew there was not a drop of water along the route save Navajo Wells, a waterhole near Del Rio.

"I'll make her, though," Bud told himself. "Got to. . . . Roll along, little dogies!"

But across the trail fell the black, omi-

nous shadow of Stinson's threat. If ever that fox should get his claws on the Sampson ranch he had so long coveted. . . . Bud's face clouded darkly. For though it could never be proved, he was certain in his own mind that Stinson had had something to do with the dry-gulching of his father.

He had covered perhaps a fourth of the distance to Del Rio, and was trailing across a weary stretch of parched and cracked sage-brush flats, when a horseman, dust caked from sombrero to boots, came riding toward him.

"Hyuh," greeted the stranger loudly. "This here yore herd?"

Bud nodded. For some reason which he was unable to comprehend he felt an instant enmity toward this flat faced, splay nosed hombre. He was certain he had seen the fellow before, but was unable to place him.

"Tutt's my name," the stranger introduced himself with a ghastly attempt at an affable grin. "County brand inspector. I see yore steers ain't road branded. New Mexico law says they got to be before you can trail drive 'em."

"I ain't on any reg'lar trail," Bud told him. "Makin' my own. An' I'm in a hurry."

Coldly the trail cutter said, "That's what I was thinkin'—in a hurry."

The eyes of the two men met and held in a long searching look. The gun hands of both rested on their hips just above holsters. Then a sudden flash of recognition leaped into the cowboy's eyes. Now he had the fellow placed. Jake Gasket, gunman-in-chief of Stinson's killer crew. Single-shot Jake, they called him.

"I'm waitin' to see yore ownership papers," said Single-shot Jake.

"An' s'pose I ain't got any." Bud's tone was casual enough, but there was an undercurrent that the other man did not miss. He stiffened perceptibly.

"Why, in that case, I'd have to hold up yore herd, I reckon."

Bud's eyes blazed. "Listen, you," he snarled. "You're not foolin' me. Get back to Stinson's buzzard roost an' tell him his fake brand inspector trick didn't work?"

The gunman's face darkened, the cords in his neck swelled to purple ropes. "Why, in that case—" he started. Faster than eye could follow, his gun hand streaked downward. In the same sweep his Colt leaped up, belching fire and smoke.

But a dead man was working the hair-trigger. Lifted half out of the saddle by Bud's slug in the middle of his flat forehead, Single-shot Jake folded limply over his horse's neck, slid to the ground in a shapeless heap.

The cowboy unbreeched his .45, blew the smoke from the barrel, slipped in another cartridge. One brief look he gave the dead man, then lifted him across the Box-S horse. With the *mecate* fastened to the gunman's saddle horn he swiftly tied hands and feet together beneath the horse's belly. Tearing a page from the tally book in his pocket, he scrawled on it "Bar-B," and pinned it to the back of Single-shot's shirt. The horse he then slapped on the rump.

A long moment Bud gazed at the pony bearing its gruesome burden across the sage barrens. "I didn't want to kill him," he said aloud, "but he asked fer it. Now I reckon the whole pack will be comin' down on me soon as they find him."

Two hours of pushing his herd across a wilderness of scrubby sage and soapweed and blistering adobe, and the cowboy found himself in a country cut up by unexpected, steep-walled arroyos, treacherous sand pits, and outcroppings of yellowish-gray rock. The going here was slow, maddeningly slow. More than once he glanced up at the great white disk of the sun, as if he would hold it where it hung. To add to his troubles, the cattle, which had tasted no water since midnight, began to show signs of thirst, wandering restlessly from the trail along which he was pointing them.

NOW his keen eyes detected, against a row of dull brown hills, a thin fringe of trees, perhaps four miles distant.

"Deception River," he decided. And recalling the tales he had heard of this treacherous stream that flowed only during the rainy season, he loped toward it, leading his remuda of two horses.

The river was merely a long streak of white sand between shallow banks studded with dwarfed and twisted willows and longleaf cottonwoods. At this point it was not more than one hundred yards wide.

"Quicksand, shore's I'm a foot high," muttered Bud. "I seen these innocent look-

in' rivers before." He bent an anxious glance backward at the approaching herd, then placing his roan between the other two horses, he pushed cautiously upon the yielding sand. Beneath the weight of the horses the hard crust bent and swayed, cracked like soft ice.

"Giddap!" Bud called sharply, sinking in his spurs. For at the first step the eternally moving sands beneath the silvery crust pulled at the horses' feet, dragged them down with a million fingers. Not to move fast on that glistening surface was death.

Safely the three horses reached the opposite bank. Immediately Bud turned them around, raced back across the same path. A hundred times, five hundred times, perhaps, he repeated the race across Deception River, until the lathered, heaving horses trembled in every muscle and Bud lost all sense of time. Now a pathway, ten or twelve feet wide, packed firm and solid, extended from bank and bank. The cowboy was surprised to see moisture showing through the hard pressed sand, staining it a dark brown.

He grinned as he tilted back his hat and mopped his dripping forehead. "Moses ain't got nothin' on me, shootin' water outer that rock. If I had time to wait I could get plenty of water."

In bunches of six he began driving the steers across. Piteously they licked at the scant moisture that had seeped through the packed sand. Vigorously Bud hazed them across, giving them no time to step off the pathway. Probably half the herd had crossed when, with a wild bellow at having caught the long-desired scent of water, all the others came charging madly into the river.

Skilfully Bud turned the leaders into the packed path, with stinging quirt and shrill *yi-yi-yi!* rushed them across. Despite his strenuous efforts, however, five steers bogged down in the quicksands. Like flies caught on gluey paper, they wove ceaselessly back and forth, bawling mournfully, sinking in deeper with every movement.

Already a wide level noose was swinging above the cowboy's Stetson. Through the air swished the riata, settled neatly over the horns of the nearest steer. The roan "went yonderly," the rope twanged taut, and the steer was jerked free of the clutching sands. Another Bud rescued, but no more. The remaining three, belly deep now, he could not dislodge. Sorrowfully he planted a merciful bullet in the brain of each, hurried on to bunch the wandering herd.

"That's $90 worth of steers gone," the cowboy reflected bitterly. "Now I ain't got enough to pay off Stinson. Not unless I kin do some persuadin'."

Unconsciously his fingers touched the butt of his Colt.

TOWARD three o'clock in the afternoon the weary trail driver emerged from a tortuous, intensely hot and airless arroyo that washed itself out onto flat desert. Before him shimmered a vast unending world of glittering white sand, sparsely dotted with dwarf mesquite and greasewood and wraith-like *ocatilla* cactus. The dreary monotony of the desolate scene was only intensified by the sight of some ribbed and scalloped dune that dragged its weary length across the forsaken earth.

Far to the south, quivering like living coals in the heat wreathed air, loomed the great red sandstone mesas that gave the desert its name. Anxiously he searched the hazy horizon for some sign of Navajo Wells, which by his reckoning, should be in this vicinity. But no indication of it did he see.

Up at the brassy sun Bud lifted dust-reddened eyes. "Bank's done closed down by this time," he thought grimly. "But mebbeso I kin augur with 'em to open up the gate."

Now the cattle were visibly suffering from their cruel thirst. Continually they bawled, heads down, tongues lolling from the sides of their parched mouths as they plodded dejectedly over the scorching sands. Constantly they strayed from the trail, the weaker animals hanging farther and farther in the drag.

It was tough—and dry.

A worried look came into the cowboy's eyes as the thought was gradually borne in upon him that he had somehow missed the waterhole. A long glance he slanted over the backs of the straggling herd, out across the heaving wasteland, as if he would conjure up the white walls and red tile roofs of Del Rio. His jaw set like a

granite. Unconsciously his nails bit into his palms.

"Them cows won't never make it to Del Rio 'thout water," he muttered between clenched teeth. "An' fer everyone that dies, Stinson, you're gettin' a bullet."

Then to the north, in a cup-like depression uncovered by the dune he had just crossed, Bud saw a clump of dull green trees. He blinked his eyes, staring, fearful lest this prove a mirage. He made out a small adobe cabin squatting beside the grove.

Bud grinned happily. Navajo Wells! He shouted huskily. Swiftly he loped to the head of the stumbling column, pointed the leaders toward the waterhole.

"Drift along; dogies. Plenty water over there."

Almost the steers seemed to sense what the cowboy told them. For with lifted heads and arched tails, having caught the smell of water, they stampeded in a body, bellowing every foot of the way. In a choking cloud of dust Bud raced to keep abreast of the frantic steers, but no horse, already tired, could outrun that herd.

By the time he had reached the stone curbed well at the edge of the grove of cottonwoods, the thirst-crazed cattle were hurtling over each other in their eagerness to lick at the few drops in the log trough. They milled frantically about with wildly rolling eyes.

Stiffly Bud dismounted, tied his spent horse to a tree. He strode toward the flat roofed, red pepper ornamented adobe cabin. In the low doorway stood watching him a short, stocky, sun-blackened Mexican.

"Buenos dios, señor," Bud greeted him pleasantly. He pointed toward the bawling steers. *"Aqua quanto?"*

The Mexican shook his sombreroed head. "No *aqua, señor.*"

Bud shot a swift glance at the Mex. "I said, how much?" he repeated. "Two bits a head?"

"No *aqua, señor,*" reiterated the Mexican softly.

The next split-second he was looking into the end of a .45. "I—said—how much."

If the Mexican did not *sabe* Americano, he certainly understood gun talk. For his black eyes opened wide, though in his stolid expression there was no change. *"Cinco pesos,"* he said.

"Five dollars!" repeated Bud angrily. "For the bunch?"

The water seller shook his head, extended a brown finger toward a single steer that was hungrily tearing off cottonwood leaves.

WITH his left hand Bud drew from his shirt pocket a ten-dollar bill. He thrust it into the man's hand at the same instant that his gun barrel tilted against the sashed stomach. "I'm in a hurry—*poco tiempo,*" he said sternly. "Get a move on pronto!"

The Mexican's eyes widened with terror. He extended open palms in an appealing gesture. "No, no, *señor,*" he earnestly entreated. "No *aqua. Señor* Stinson, he keel!"

Bud laughed shortly. "So? Well, I keel, too, *amigo mio.*"

Under the double threat of the American's gaze and his cocked six-shooter, the Mexican turned toward the corral beside the cabin. From it he drove two small, wiry oxen and yoked them to the stout well rope.

"Andele!" he shouted at the straining oxen, while he belabored them with a short rawhide whip. "Go on . . . go on!"

The wooden pulley creaked. The steers, seeming to know that at last they were about to taste water, crowded about the trough. Bud, peering down into the cool, black, stone ribbed well saw a stout barrel slowly nearing the top.

Then, as usually happened when the oxen were near the end of the two-hundred foot rope, and the barrel only a few yards from the top of the curbing, they stopped.

"Little more!" yelled Bud, bending over the well, ready to seize the rope bail and tilt the barrel into the trough.

"Poco mas . . . poco mas!" echoed the ox driver, laying on with his whip.

Then, when Bud's eager fingers were touching the edge of the brimming barrel, suddenly it dropped away from him and the rope sizzled over the ratting, swaying pulley. The barrel struck the water with a deep, resounding *be-joom!*

"Hey!" yelled Bud in surprise and anger.

The Mexican, still holding the knife with which he had cut the rope, was hurrying

the oxen toward the corral. *"Por amor de Dios!"* he screamed in stony-eyed terror, pointing stiffly toward a knot of horsemen bearing down on the waterhole. *"Señor* Stinson hombres—they keel! *Por Dios!"* Devoutly he crossed himself as he ran.

Yelling like Apaches, blazing away with six-guns, the Box-S riders swirled down on the restless cattle, scattered them like tumbleweeds before a norther. Bud stepped out to meet the howling, shooting vandals, and he came with guns smoking. A slug tore the hat from his head, dust spurted up at his feet.

"Get 'im, boys," roared a heavy voice.

Bud spun on his boot heel. Joe Beers it was, riding straight at him. The cowboy dropped to one knee as the foreman's hail of death screamed over him. From Bud's guns spurted twin jets of crimson. Up shot Joe's arm, and he fell from the saddle to the ground, squealing like a stuck pig.

A grim smile on his lips, the light of battle in his eye, Bud darted behind the water trough. At his back was the stone curbing of the well. With practiced fingers he emptied one cartridge belt and piled the cartridges beside him. No fear was in the cowboy's gray eyes, only an intense watchfulness. The hands that gripped his brace of Colts, though cold as ice, were steady.

He waited, while the Box-S men scattered to find concealment behind rock or cactus or dune. Six against one. But in a gun fight the waddy was the equal of any two men who ever threw lead. The other four—well, *quien sabe?*

A bullet thudded into the log trough. As if it were a signal to open the battle, lead began to hum over him like swarms of angry hornets, to spit against the curbing. To the cowboy crouching behind the trough it was poison to hold his fire while hot lead moaned and whined over him. Joe, slowly dragging himself toward a clump of cholla cactus, was the only man he could see.

Then, to his right, in a mesquite choked depression, he caught a glimpse of a checkered shirt. Sharply Bud watched, holding his breath. A keen thrill shivered up his spine; he smiled grimly. It was a man, bellying toward him, Indian fashion. The man cautiously raised his head. In the same thin shadow of an instant two-guns roared. Bud's slitted eyes glinted as the stalker sank out of sight with a bullet between his eyes.

FROM a window in the cabin a gun crashed. As though struck by a bolt of lightning, Bud crumpled up, and in falling cut his head against the jagged stones of the well. He went out. Almost instantly his left sleeve was dyed crimson, a slow stream welled from the gash in the back of his head.

The Box-S marksman came out of the adobe house, swaggered slowly up to his victim. He turned Bud over with his boot, looked carefully into the white, drawn face. A grim smile came over the man's bearded lips.

"Bueno, men!" he called to his comrades. "I got the skunk. Pour some red-eye into Joe an' let's cut dirt fer home."

But it took more than one bullet to kill Bud Sampson. Especially when that bullet had merely shattered his left arm and torn a hole in his side big enough for a steer to step in. As for the wound in his scalp—well, he had been struck on the head with a gun butt harder than that.

Slowly, painfully, consciousness returned and his blurred vision made out the figure of a man bending over him. It was the Mexican, and he was holding the neck of a bottle between Bud's teeth. Obediently Bud gulped down the fiery tequila. Almost immediately he sat up, ran exploring fingers over his bandaged head and the arm bound tightly against his side.

"Water—water!" he mumbled thickly. *"Mil gracios."*

As he set down the tin cup he noticed for the first time a bluish-purple welt above the Mexican's half-closed eye.

"That beeg Stinson hombre, heem do it," explained the desert man simply. *"El agua, señor."* Then he added with sudden vindictiveness, "You keel 'em, *señor?"*

"Si, señor," answered Bud absently.

Then, as full consciousness returned, he looked quickly about for his herd. But not a steer did he see. Gone also were his two spare horses, although the roan tied to the cottonwoods had not been molested. Slowly he raised his throbbing eyes toward the sun, now scarcely an hour from its setting.

"Sorter got me cold-decked," he said to himself.

Black despair possessed him. With the aid of the kindly Mexican, he got to his feet, staggered to his horse, climbed into the saddle.

"Hasta la vista," said the Mexican.

"Buenos noches, señor," returned the cowboy. Under his breath he added, "An' it's good night fer you, Stinson, if I've got to come back from hell to kill you."

IN the dining room of the Box-S ranch house it was supper time. Soft light glowed from the big shiny oil lamp that hung from the ceiling. Across the long, oilcloth covered table a double row of silent, hungry cowpunchers faced each other. At the head of the table, facing the door which led into the kitchen from the hall and with his back to the door opening onto a bedroom, sat Stinson. The chair at the opposite end of the table, Joe Beers' chair, was vacant. Between the table and the range, the fat, oily-faced Chinese cook padded noiselessly. The only sound in the room was the clink of knife or fork against plates, or the occasional scrape of a boot heel against the cross-piece of one of the benches.

Suddenly Stinson's coffee cup halted halfway to his mouth. His crafty eyes, opened wide for once, were fixed on the door in a blank stare.

As though pulled by the same string, every head on both sides of the table pivoted in the direction of Old Stinson's gaze. Every pair of eyes riveted on the door.

There, hat pulled tightly over his bandaged head, left arm encased in blood-stained flour sacks and bound closely to his side, stood Bud Sampson. Gripped in his right hand was a .45. Straight between Stinson's eyes it pointed.

"Hands on the table, ever'body—straight in front of you." Bud's voice was low, yet it had the ring of steel. "The man that don't show two hands is dead."

Quickly the men placed their hands on the table, palms down. The cattleman, who alone among them wore a gun, was the last to comply.

"Stinson," Bud continued in the same level tones, "I've come to pay you off."

The cowman's little eyes narrowed. "If you mean yore mortgage, that's payable at the bank."

"I mean the mortgage, an' it's payable right here."

Stinson's tongue licked at his dry lips. His eyes blazed like those of a cornered coyote. But he did not move a muscle.

"With the help of these wolves here," Bud said, "my bunch of cows has been delivered on yore range. Fifteen hundred dollars' wuth, countin' the two hosses. I'm waitin' fer you to give me a receipt, statin' the mortgage is paid in full."

Old Stinson smiled crookedly. "But that ain't legal. That wouldn't hold in court."

"It'll hold in Judge Colt's court. Yore hidin' behind the law is ended, Stinson. Cook—bring paper an' pen."

The dead silence that pervaded the room was broken by the tiny scratching of Stinson's pen as he wrote and signed the receipt for $1,500 in full payment of his mortgage against the Sampson ranch. As he laid down the pen, he bent a swift, cunning look into the double row of immovable faces in an eloquent appeal for help. But no man at that table, reckless though he might be, would invite the certain death that looked at him from the black muzzle of Bud Sampson's six-gun.

"Here's yore blackmail," Old Stinson said shortly.

"Hand it to me, cook."

But as the Chinaman shuffled forward to do the cowboy's bidding, the doorway back of Old Stinson was filled with the huge form of Joe Beers. One lightning glance Bud caught of the murder-distorted face. Then two jagged jets of flame leaped across the room, two six-guns roared. Even as Bud staggered against the stove, momentarily paralyzed by the slug that burned his left shoulder, he saw, past the curtain of powder smoke, a black hole leap between the foreman's eyes.

"Git him, men!" he heard Stinson shrieking. Far away it sounded to the cowboy because of the drumming in his ears.

Already the cattleman's gun was up. Death whistled past Bud's ear. With an angry roar his gun answered, but he had aimed into a swirling haze shot with livid streaks of crimson. Behind the avalanche of cowhands that leaped up from overturned benches and poured toward him, he lost sight of Stinson.

He felt cold, then hot.

Desperately Bud flashed a shot at the

lamp. A tinkling of glass, a sputtering of flame, and the room was plunged in darkness. Out of the mass of hurtling bodies, crashing furniture and deep-throated curses, he dragged his sorely wounded body toward the head of the table.

"You got to get him, Bud," he kept muttering, deliriously. "You got to get him."

Then someone threw a newspaper into the firebox of the range. Instantly the light leaped into every part of the room.

BUD staggered up, his other gun clutched in his hand. Three feet in front of him crouched Old Stinson. But before he could pull trigger, Bud's muzzle pressed hard into his stomach.

"Drop that gun an' raise 'em!" he snapped, forcing the cattleman between him and the gunmen. "Every man of you line up, face to the wall. The jasper that looks back is dead. Gimme that paper, Stinson."

Briefly Bud glanced at the receipt for $1,500 and the clause cancelling the mortgage, awkwardly stuffed it in the pocket of his Levis.

"I ain't killin' you, Stinson—this time," he said rapidly, as though racing with the flood of black oblivion he felt rushing upon him. "I'm callin' her square. An'—don't no man try to foller me."

Swiftly he backed out of the kitchen, turned into the wide hall. Down the hall he hurried toward the front door, reeling from wall to wall. As he stepped upon the veranda he shot a glance over his shoulder. Not a second too soon. For, leaning out of the kitchen door was Stinson, eye squinted down the barrel of his Smith & Wesson. Bud half wheeled, clawed for his Colt.

As one, the six-guns thundered. Stinson stumbled into the hall. Two steps he took toward the man he had tried to ruin, then his knees gave way under him and he pitched on his face, dead.

With smoking gun, Bud lurched from the veranda, staggered across the yard to the hitch rack beside the gate. Summoning up the last remnant of his fast-fading strength, he pulled himself into the saddle. "Fog it, old boy!" he whispered.

The roan sprang away into the moonless night. He looked back. No one was following. In a shallow, piñon rimmed draw he reined up, listening. No sound of hoof beats on his trail. Perhaps the Box-S men would not follow. After all, it was not their fight.

In feverish haste Bud loosened his riata. With trembling, fumbling fingers he tied his feet beneath the horse's belly, trussed himself to the saddle as tightly as he could draw the rope. Then, when the last knot was tied, as if released by the iron will that had held it back so long, a swift flood of blackness swept over the cowboy, engulfed him. Slowly his weary, wounded body sank over the horse's neck.

"Home . . ." he murmured, dreamily, brokenly, while the pounding against his ear drums grew farther and farther away. "I reckon—Stinson's—paid in full."

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Hallelujah's six-gun syndicate laughed when the soft-voiced stranger hit their Helldorado. But that was before they'd danced to the lead fandango of his lusty hide-out guns.

"....BUT THE STRANGER DIDN'T SCARE"

By JOHN G. PEARSOL

THE gray-eyed stranger slid out of a five-hundred-dollar kak in front of the 'Dobe Dollar and walked straight into a nest of rattlesnakes.

Their shrewd eyes steady and unblinking, the hard-faced men before the 'Dobe Dollar watched him come. His black frock coat-tails fluttered before their eyes, but the loungers saw no guns slung under that im-

maculate braid-trimmed coat. No gun belt sagged at the stranger's slim waist.

Snake Larson looked with envious black eyes at the stranger's nervous-footed black mare, at the expensive silver inlaid saddle. He mentally estimated the possible wealth of this dressed-up, gunless ranny, and a wicked grin spread over his thick lips. He smirked knowingly at his five killers.

"Mornin', Deacon," he said oilily, and stepped square in the path of the calmly advancing stranger.

Up and down, like the flashing glance of a mountain cat, the cold gray eyes looked him over. Insolently the stranger drew down one corner of his straight-lipped mouth.

"Listen!" The frock-coated stranger's voice was sharp. Dangerously sharp, like the crack of a '30. "Listen! I don't know you. You don't know me. *Get out of my way!*"

The five rannies behind Snake Larson grinned crookedly. Hell's bells! This dressed-up deacon, tin horn, or whatever he was, sure picked out a wall-eyed heller to tame when he tackled Snake Larson. One of the loungers hitched up his gun belt—carelessly—and licked his lips in anticipation.

Snake Larson crouched like a cat. His glittering black eyes blazed with fury. Nervously his fingers twitched above his black gun butts.

The slim-waisted stranger stood straight and stiff as a ramrod. His slim white hands hung listlessly at his sides. His hard gray eyes held a curious light—they *twinkled*—as if the picture of the glaring, crouching Snake Larson was somehow amusing.

"Tch-tch-tch," his tongue clicked, as if he were reprimanding a bad little boy. "A shame," he said evenly, "to work yourself up that way." Sadly he shook his head at Snake Larson. "A pity," said the stranger.

Snake Larson fairly boiled over. His muscles twitched with sudden effort.

Swish! One lightning movement—and the fast iron of Snake Larson leaped from its holster.

Killer Larson in action! The five *hombres* behind him grinned afresh as he started the draw.

But the grins disappeared — suddenly erased like chalk marks on a sponged slate. Their startled eyes beheld a flash of scintillating light. Like magic a gun appeared in the stranger's slim right hand.

And the stranger's gun spoke first.

Another flick of light, and the gun disappeared under his frock coat again. Snake Larson drummed away his life with his boot toes on the sand in front of the 'Dobe Dollar.

A miracle! Then the cold, even voice of the tall, erect stranger was asking questions of Larson's five followers. Asking them, quietly, if they were aiming to back their leader's play.

But the five rannies didn't move. They couldn't. They seemed to be petrified in their tracks, their tongues frozen in their mouths. They just stared at him stupidly.

The stranger turned away from them and stepped over the dead man, looking down at the body as he did so. Carefully he raised his left foot, so that his boot might not touch the sprawled form, as if he feared defilement.

He strode slowly to the door of the saloon. And the men in the doorway stepped respectfully aside as he entered. But already a horse and rider had left the vicious little town of Hallelujah, bearing the news. The loungers listened to the receding sound of pounding hoofs, and grinned inwardly. Snake Larson was dead. But the thought of what Lobo Larson would do when he heard of this dude stranger who had gunned his brother, Snake, was pleasant.

A HALF hundred curious eyes watched the frock-coated stranger walk up to the rough-hewn bar. Who was this straight-backed, set-faced ranny who could flip an iron like a streak of light? Whose eyes were like the granite rocks of the distant mountains—just as gray, and just as expressionless? A half hundred news-hungry ears heard him speak to Long John, who stood waiting behind the bar.

"A dealer? He'd deal for the house. . . . He'd rent a table and run a game of his own. . . . Two hundred iron men?"

Ten golden twenties clinked musically on the bar, and the stranger walked to a table at the back of the room. Facing the room, he sat at the table. Cards appeared from a pocket of his black coat. He broke the seal and riffled the paste-boards dexterously with his nimble white fingers.

"An open game," he called in a mono-

tone. "An open game. The blue sky of Arizona is the limit. A square deal for everybody. A square deal in cards and guns."

He flipped some cards upon the table. "The cases are open," he went on, "and your bets are called—called by Durango Duke."

An audible sigh swept over the room. Durango Duke! The hide-out king! The notorious two-gun ace of spades from below the Line. Durango Duke was in Hallelujah. Dealing his cards, sitting calmly at his table waiting—waiting for Lobo Larson.

And the gun-wise rannies in the 'Dobe Dollar grinned like mountain cats licking bloody chops as they thought of the surprise that Lobo Larson would receive when he came to avenge the brother whose ugly beak even now plowed into the bloody sand in front of the saloon.

But if the gray-eyed, frock-coated Durango Duke cared a tinker's dam for the respect of the bushwhackers of Hallelujah, he didn't show it. If he cared when Lobo Larson, blood in his eyes, would come a-gunning to the 'Dobe Dollar, he didn't show that either. No emotion flickered behind his hard eyes.

"An open game," he repeated invitingly. "An open game. The limit? Nothing but the blue sky of Arizona, gents. A square-deal game, a square deal. The cases are open. Your bets are covered. Play the game, gents."

That was Durango Duke. Always ready, always willing to back up his words. A square deal with the sky the limit. Always alone, never smiling. Never a gun belt showing about his thighs.

But the men of Hallelujah knew that under his immaculate frock coat, snug in their hide-outs, rested two light-framed .41's. Two dark, somber .41's, always ready, and more deadly than the fangs of a Gila monster.

So the hard-faced rannies who ordinarily said their say, and backed their words with burning lead, now kept their hands from their gun butts and their tongues behind their teeth.

And all of Hallelujah waited for the coming of Snake Larson's brother. The cases were open and the next deal was —Lobo Larson's.

THE blue-black eyes of Lobo Larson glittered dangerously. His thick lips drew back into a wolfish snarl that exposed his crooked teeth. He swayed menacingly on the balls of his feet.

"Fast, huh?" he snarled furiously. "Fast as hell, huh?" He peered curiously at Loco Enright. "Faster'n—"

Slap! Like darting lightning Lobo Larson's iron streaked from its holster. Steadily, it stared with its cold round eye at Loco Enright's belly.

"Faster'n *that?*" Larson breathed hard.

Enright's slate-colored eyes blinked. "Gosh, boss," he whispered huskily, "I dunno. He's fast—fast as hell. He flashes 'em from a hide-out an' dresses up like a deacon. If he's got a handle, I don't know it. I left right after—after he shot Snake."

Larson cursed vilely. "A deacon—a tin horn, mebby. An' *five* of yuh hard gunnies let 'im get away with it."

Blazing, his eyes flashed contemptuously up and down Enright's quailing form. "Gunmen!" he spat. "Gunmen hell! Coyotes! Crawlin', yella-bellied coyotes!"

Furiously he paced the room at the back of Gonzales' Cantina. His blue-black eyes, blazing with the light of hateful lust, swept to the nervous Loco Enright.

"Gunmen!" muttered Lobo Larson again. "Five gunmen lets a gun-slick deacon gut-shoot my brother." Ominous his tone was now.

Larson swung swiftly about. Loco Enright, eyes fearful, raised his right hand protestingly. Lobo's chest rose and fell furiously with pent-up passion. His hand moved—suddenly.

"Gosh, boss," yelled Enright. "Wait! Hell's fi—!"

The roar of Lobo Larson's gun in the little room was ear-shattering. Smoking gun in hand, Lobo looked hot-eyed down on the quivering body of Loco Enright.

"Gunmen!" he spat again. "Fast!" he grunted contemptuously. *"Nobody's* as fast as Lobo Larson. *Nobody* pots m' brother —*nobody!* I gut-shoots them as does it; I gut-shoots them as lets it be did!"

With a vicious thrust, he shoved his black-butted gun into its holster. Spurring the twisted body of Loco Enright with his booted foot, Larson strode with long purposeful strides through the *cantina.* Out-

side, he swung upon his big bay, angrily jerked the animal's head around, and spurred northward. Northward to a smoke-fest with a gun-slick deacon. Lobo Larson grinned wickedly—in evil anticipation.

Northward he pounded on a blood trail. Wolf-eyed, he watched ahead of him. Ah! Who was that? A ranny high-tailing it south.

Swiftly and silently, like the wolf for which he was named, Larson slipped into the mesquite bordering the trail. Carbine ready, he knelt behind a clump of brush. The soft double "elk" of his rifle hammer was drowned by the drumming hoofs of the fast-approaching bronc.

The rider came into view, and Lobo Larson rose from his place of concealment. Shouting, he shuffled forward through the sand.

"Hell," he grunted throatily as the rider slid his sweat-streaked bronc to a halt, "Grogan, where yuh goin'?"

"I was comin' for yuh, Boss." Grogan's flabby jowls quivered as he talked rushingly. "There's a Colt-fannin' ranny in Hallelujah that gunned Snake—ain't yuh seen Loco?"

Larson nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said coldly, "I seen him, Grogan."

"Well"—Grogan looked about him—"where is he, Lobo? Where's Loco?"

Lobo Larson spat at a mesquite stick in the sand. "He had a accident, Grogan," he said coldly. "How come yuh're comin' down this way, huh?"

Grogan shrugged his heavy shoulders and threw out an arm in a gesture of apology. "Boss," he said, "git ready for a shock. I come down t' tell yuh who this jasper was that gunned Snake." Grogan shook his head. "Yuh'd never guess in a million years, Boss, yuh never would. It's —*Durango Duke!*"

Lobo Larson's head jerked a little. To the anger in his blue-black eyes there was added a trace of fear, or caution. His grip tightened where his thumbs were hooked over his gun belt.

"Yeah?" he drawled. "Well," he spat again, "there's more'n one way t' git a gent that hails from Durango."

He hitched up his belt as he strode to his bronc. "Come on, Grogan," he said, "we'll talk this over."

HALLELUJAH got a jolt. A jolt in the persons of Kate Andrews and her brother, Bob. They alighted from the creaking stage on an afternoon when every mother's son in Hallelujah was—inexplicably—cold sober. So the men of Hallelujah knew that they were real; not just liquor-inspired visions. A pretty, golden-haired girl, and a weak, pale-faced boy.

Two babes in the woods looking for their uncle—an uncle who had died with a bullet in his belly not so many weeks ago. And the hard-eyed rannies of Hallelujah grinned as they thought of this sweet-faced girl and her sickly brother. Some—a few of them—shook their heads sadly. But most of them grinned.

So, when the doors of the 'Dobe Dollar swung open at the entry of Lobo Larson, his beady blue-black eyes stared unbelievingly at the radiant girl with golden hair who sang beside the battered piano at the end of the hall.

The room quieted—still as death—as Lobo Larson's glance roved over the place. The voice of the singer wavered. Her blue eyes widened as they gazed upon the evil face of Larson; then at the motionless form of Durango Duke. A score of border buzzards looked with her—first at Larson and then at Duke.

Lobo's thick lips moved, and his harsh voice cracked the eerie silence. "Huh!" he grunted. "This is good. An angel has come t' Hallelujah."

He guffawed coarsely, and his crooked teeth showed like wolf fangs. His spurs clinked musically as he strode, heavy-footed, to the bar. Grogan, bull-necked and massive, stomped along behind him.

"An open game." The even monotone of Durango Duke broke into the tense silence of the 'Dobe Dollar. "An open game. A square deal. Place your bets and play the game, gents. Your bets are always covered. The limit is the blue sky of Arizona. The cases are open—play the game, gents."

His voice cut through the silence like a dirge. Lobo Larson whirled and stared menacingly at Durango.

Duke's hard gray eyes bored into Lobo's blue-black ones, bored steadily, fearlessly, warningly. "The sky's the limit," he called, poker-faced. "Your bets are covered—by Durango Duke." Unflinching, his lean face as expressionless as a white poker

chip, Durango Duke waited. He had said his say, and now he waited for Lobo to make the next move.

Larson's blue-black eyes wavered, shifted uneasily, and then rested upon the whiskey glass in his left hand. "My gosh," he said loudly and derisively—"a new tin-horn, too. A new tin-horn an' a angel. Ain't that awful?" He turned his back and gulped the drink.

A corner of Durango Duke's straight-lipped mouth dropped in scorn. Somewhere a boot shuffled. A chest deflated with a sigh that could be heard throughout the room. As if Lobo Larson didn't know who this tin-horn was! As if the Wolf didn't *sabe* that here was the gun-slick who had gunned his brother! Lobo Larson was showing a feather that didn't have any color in it. Either that or he had an ace up his sleeve. Which was it?

A man laughed jeeringly at the rear of the hall. Lobo Larson whirled, red-faced, his burning eyes searching for the mirthful one.

"A square deal. The sky is the limit." Durango's steady voice droned again. Lobo glanced at him, hate in his blue-black eyes, baffled hate, with a trace of fear mixed with it. He seemed to forget his purpose in seeking out the laughter. His body wilted a little as he again turned to the bar and loudly ordered another drink.

The tight tension in the smoky air melted. Feet began to shuffle, glasses clinked, a low babble of sibilant voices filled the room. The skinny, red-headed, freckled ranny at the ancient piano began beating out tinny music. The silvery voice of the singer resumed its song.

And above it all came the cold, dry voice of Durango Duke. "The sky's the limit, gents. Guns or cards. A square deal to all." The words buzzed in Lobo Larson's huge ears like some hateful insect. Dam' that ice-faced ranny! He'd fix him right!

THE expressionless gray eyes of Durango Duke were destined to lose some of their rock-like character, to become human, although no less cold and hard than before. And the men in the 'Dobe Dollar saw the change. They saw it when Durango Duke looked at the golden-haired, blue-eyed singer. Respect appeared in Duke's eyes. The hard lines of his lean face softened somewhat, and sometimes he smiled.

The 'Dobe Dollar bushwhackers grinned to themselves. What they thought was nobody's business but their own, and what they did was—nothing. With Kate Andrews under the watchful protection of Durango Duke, not a ranny in Hallelujah dared make an advance to the blue-eyed girl. She was as safe as she would have been in a Mex mission—safer, because the missions are sometimes raided by *banditos*.

And of all the men in Hallelujah, none was so sardonically gleeful as Lobo Larson. He smiled crookedly as he read in Durango Duke's gray eyes admiration for the girl—or perhaps it was something stronger than admiration. And his grin became wickedly triumphant as Lobo saw that Kate Andrews' eyes were tender, too. These two, the lean, frock-coated gambler and the pretty, silvery-voiced singer, were rapidly falling in love. Lobo Larson hugged this knowledge to himself and bided his time.

He smiled in anticipation one afternoon when, from the dirt-encrusted window of the 'Dobe Dollar, he saw Durango Duke and Kate Andrews riding side by side down the dusty street of Hallelujah.

Lobo turned to Pinto Parsons, a thin, spotchy-faced ranny who rode in Lobo's gang. "Pinto," ordered Larson, "grab yore bronc an' high-tail it for Los Verdes. Git a holt of Frio Ganns an' tell 'im we'll have somebody down t' see him real *pronto*."

"Hell's fire, boss!" Pinto's eyes widened, and the ugly splotches stood out gray against the tan of his skin, like a pinto horse. "Frio Ganns? Yuh ain't got no—no trouble with Frio? I don' wanna—"

"Git th' hell outa here," Lobo snapped, his black eyes sparkling dangerously. "Yuh don't know what it's all about." He pointed a thick, stubby finger at Pinto's sunken chest. "I—said—tell—Frio—Ganns—what—I—said. Gonna do it?" his tongue lashed like a cracking whip.

Pinto's pointed Adam's apple jerked violently up and down his scrawny neck. "Yeah, boss," he said. "I'll tell 'im."

Lobo Larson grinned at Parsons' skinny back as his frightened hireling left the room. Then he whirled and froze the eyes of four rannies who stood beside him.

"Listen," said Lobo, "there's gonna be

some fun here *pronto*. Gonna be plenty action—plenty *dinero*—an' plenty hell, mebby."

His eyes swept the expectant group. They said nothing. Larson continued: "T'night, when that gal goes t' her shack, all yuh hombres foller me out—but not too close t'gether. Kinda easy like—first one an' then, after a minute, another—*sabe?* Meet me at her place. We'll grab her an' high-tail it for Frio's hang-out."

"What about 'er brother?" Bull-necked Grogan asked in his deep, throaty voice.

Larson's thick lips twisted into a crooked smile. "What do I care?" he asked callously. "Kill th' drunken bum—bat 'im over th' *cabeza*—or anything yuh wanna. I only wants th' gal, an' t' git that dam' deacon, Durango Duke, outa here so I can kill 'im—*slow!*"

Grogan's deep brown eyes behind their pouchy lids burned queerly with a speculative light. "Where's th' *dinero* come in?" he asked.

Lobo grinned as if at a joke. "Duke's got that on him. Ganns gits th' *dinero*."

"But, boss"—Lobo turned from his start toward the door at Grogan's insistence—"but, boss—Frio gits th' cash that's on this Duke jasper for helpin' us out—huh?"

Eyes cold, Lobo nodded.

"An' *you* git this Duke fella?"

Again Larson nodded.

Grogan looked at the floor and prodded a splinter with his boot toe. "Well," he asked, "what does *we* git?"

Larson's blue-black eyes flicked to all four rannies in front of him. The expressions in their faces indicated that they were backing Grogan's question. An evil grin spread over Lobo's coarse face. "Yeah," he said, "Frio gits th' cash—I gits th' Duke—an' *you* rannies git—th' gal! That fair?"

Grogan raised his puffy eyes. There was a hungry gleam in them, and an evil smile on his flabby face. He turned his big head and glanced at the other three men.

They grinned and nodded agreement.

Fair? A young girl, golden-haired, pretty—was that fair? It was!

MOUNTAINS. Scrubby pine—sage—mesquite—sand. An old story to Durango Duke, but not to Kate Andrews. She talked of glorious sunsets, of multi-colored rock on sun-struck mountain-sides. Of blue skies and distant yellow haze.

Durango Duke "yes mam'd" and "no mam'd" and listened to the crunch of their broncs' feet in sand. He thrilled at her silvery laughter and found a strange yearning in his heart that he was wise enough to understand, foolish enough to encourage.

"And the men," Kate went on jocularly as they dismounted under a huge balanced rock near the top of the mountain, "the men of the West. I can't understand them. They say such horrible things with such evident sincerity." She glanced sidewise at Durango Duke. "They even talk of *you* being a killer," she said.

Their broncs ground-hitched behind them, they sat side by side on the high ledge overlooking the valley. Far below, like an ugly wart on the face of nature, sprawled the 'dobe town of Hallelujah at the foot of the mountain. Duke's gray eyes swung from the wide valley. He turned his head toward Kate.

She met his gaze squarely. "It's not true, is it?" she asked, her voice low and soft.

"Well, ma'am—Kate—" He looked thoughtfully at the distant peak of Sierra Colorado, "no, I wouldn't say I was just that." He turned his eyes upon her again, and then dropped them before the frankness of her gaze.

"But," she continued in a tone that Durango Duke could not fathom, "you *have* killed men, haven't you?"

Mentally, Duke squirmed. What sort of girl was this? Was she one who would shudder with horror when told she was sitting beside a man who carried a bloody gun?

But he might as well tell her. She'd know anyway—soon.

"Well, yes, Kate," he said cautiously. "Yes, I have killed a few men. Down here, you know, you just have to do it—either that or be killed yourself."

He looked deeply into her steady blue eyes. When he spoke again his voice carried a tone of appeal. "But," he said, "I had hoped—it—it wouldn't make much difference to you. I mean—about the killing part—and the way you feel." He stopped, confused.

Her blue eyes dropped. Her eyelids, fringed with long golden lashes, lowered. She turned her head and gazed out across

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She laid a
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almost a whisper, "it doesn
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Durango Duke suddenly sti
seething mind digested that st
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She raised her eyes aga
steadily at him. It was like t
of an enchanted spell. Suddenly
fully schooled restraint deserted him.
swept her into his arms, held her c
against his breast, and crushed his h
lips to hers.
For a moment she lay quietly in his a
Then, eyes tear-stained, she pushed aw
from him. "Don't, Duke! Please! You
mustn't!"
He released her and stared searchingly into her flushed face.
"I'm sorry," she said, a sob in her low voice. "There's something I should have told you."
Duke flashed a glance at her as she paused.
"I—" she went on, "the man who came here with me—is not my brother."
An icy claw suddenly seemed to squeeze his heart. Suddenly cold, Durango waited.
"He's," she finished slowly, "my—husband!"

DUKE sat rigid. Her words came with a rush now, as if the dam of her pent-up emotions had burst.
"We had to come out here for his—his health. We were stranded in Hallelujah when we discovered that my uncle had died. Bob is not able to work, so I had to do something. I thought I could get work more readily if he posed as my brother. I'm sorry, Duke, terribly sorry—"
Fascinated, Duke listened. This glorious girl and that weak-kneed, pale-faced, besotted bum—married! Unconsciously, Durango Duke's gray eyes grew scornful. His straight lips curled.
Kate Andrews correctly read the expression in his face.
"Duke," she cried, "don't look like that.

stood beside
her side and p
gentle touch.
"Brace up, Ka
"I'll see what I can

THAT night the golden winnings at Durango Duke's table meant nothing to him. His mind was filled with thoughts of a golden-haired girl who was another man's wife—the wife of a drink-soaked coward whom Duke had promised to help.
But though his mind was filled with bitterness at the trick that fate had played him, his gray eyes were no less keen than before. He noticed the fleeting glance of triumph flashed at him by the leering Lobo Larson as that slit-eyed buck slid out of the door of the 'Dobe Dollar. He wondered what that triumphant look meant. Trouble? Yes. But for whom?
A few hours later he knew. A swarthy-faced Mexican *muchacho* slipped to Durango Duke's table and handed him a note. Duke flipped a coin to the boy, unfolded the paper, and read:

Dear Deacon. We got yoor gurl. Yu can git her if yu have guts enuf to cum to Los Verdes and bring five thousan dollers.
LOBO LARSON.

Durango sat up with a jerk. *His* girl! Duke balled the note into a crumpled wad and flung it from him. Not *his* girl. A

ed. Then, eyes flam-
deliberately raised his right
ck Durango Duke across the
ly the boy recoiled and raised
rm before his bloodshot eyes.
made no move to retaliate.
tayed in their hideouts.
aced, the gambler stood, his
ch mask about his black coat.
was—right," he muttered.
n, violently, he shoved Andrews
re him—through the door and up
Andrews expostulating and sput-
with helpless rage, Durango Duke
d him to the back of a "livery" bronc,
applied him with guns and a gun belt.
Then, with five thousand dollars in his saddle bags, his own fast black mare between his legs, Durango prodded Andrews through the night.

Through the black night till the next day dawned—a day of blazing sun, burning thirst, and awful suspense. Duke's heretofore expressionless eyes burned with disgust for this craven husband, glowed with determination to redeem his promise to a blue-eyed, golden-haired girl wife. And in them, too, raged a fiery hatred for Lobo Larson. In them was the threat of death, cold, stark and terrible.

SWAYING in his saddle, muttering resentfully, remonstrating uselessly, Andrews rode on. Shivering at the cold deadliness of Durango's harsh voice, Andrews fingered the black butt of the gun slung at his waist.

Durango easily read the thoughts in the man's mind. He was wondering if he had a chance to kill this frock-coated Nemesis who rode so persistently behind him, this hot-eyed devil who taunted him with cutting words, who drove him so remorselessly.

"A gun in your belt, Andrews," Duke taunted. "A gun in your belt. Your wife with Lobo Larson. Don't try it on me, Andrews. Lobo—and Kate—are waiting for you. All you need now is guts."

Andrews rubbed his trembling hand

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ther, Durango
neeks. Slapped
blood-red.
Then Dura ng across the room to a
rickety washstand. He grasped the big white china pitcher and poured the tepid water over Andrews' face. Spluttering incoherently, the man sat up.

"LOBO LARSON," yelled Durango into his ear. "Lobo's got Kate—your wife. You rat, can't you *sabe* that?"

Realization at last drove Andrews to his feet. Drunkenly he swayed before Durango Duke.

"Lobo Larson?" he repeated dumbly. "Why—why—he's a—a *killer,* ain't he?"

Durango sneered at him. "Yes, he's a killer, you yellow-bellied louse. What of it? He's got Kate!"

"Why—why—" Andrews stuttered, his eyes blinking. "You," he finally said, freezing his bloodshot eyes to Durango's own, "*you* can get her back—can't you?"

Something seemed to snap inside of Durango Duke's head. His face whitened. His gray eyes glowed with a somber fire. His supple white fingers clutched fiercely Andrews' shoulder, dug in like eagle-talons until the boy winced with pain and tried to draw away.

Durango's eyes burned with cold fire as

over the smooth gun butt and shivered again. Guts! Kate! Lobo Larson! He half turned in his saddle and looked with smoldering eyes at the devil behind him.

"That's all, Andrews," jibed Durango mercilessly. "That's all you need—just guts."

Andrews sobbed with rage. "A drink, Durango," he begged. "I gotta have a drink."

Durango's gray eyes were inscrutable. "A drink—you louse! Your yellow belly's full of rot-gut now. That's what's the matter with you. Whiskey courage! Yah! You don't want a drink. You want guts!"

Eyes blazing, skin crawling, Andrews rode on. And behind him persisted that taunting voice.

"You have a gun—I have five thousand dollars. That give you an idea? No? Well, all you have to do is *kill* Lobo Larson after I've paid to get your wife away from him."

Andrews squirmed in his saddle.

"Then you'll have five thousand berries to drink yourself to death with. Then your wife won't have to sing in a dance hall to keep you in drinkin' licker. Remember that—all you need to get along in this old world is a gun—and guts!"

Durango Duke laughed, sneeringly. "That's all I had—and now I'm paying five thousand dollars for *your* wife."

"Quit it!" Andrews jerked his horse to a standstill. He screamed and whirled in his saddle. "Quit it," he yelled again. "If you don't—I—I'll *kill* you!"

Duke laughed again. Then he peered into Andrews' blood-rimmed eyes, and his face sobered. But still he talked, the taunt was still in his voice.

"That's the spirit," he praised. "Kill somebody. Get mad. I was beginning to believe you *couldn't* get mad. But," he went on soberly, "Kate said you were all right."

He chuckled, and Andrews gritted his teeth.

"Kill somebody," he yelled, tears in his eyes, voice choking. "You're dam' right I'll kill somebody—you!"

Unmoving, Durango Duke sat on his black mare and stared steadily into the boy's bloodshot eyes.

"Yes," he said coldly, "I believe you'd do it. Kill me because you have a gun and I haven't," he lied smoothly. "Then you'd have the money and your wife could go to hell. That it?"

Andrews jerked in his saddle. His limp body stiffened. His hand moved away from his gun. His eyes hardened, and his voice came low and deadly soft. "You're wrong, Duke," he said. "I'm not much account—but I'm not quite *that* rotten."

For a moment, Durango Duke stared into Andrews' eyes, saw there something which had been hidden before, hidden from all but his understanding wife, Kate. Durango urged his black mare forward a step, reached out and gripped Andrews' hand firmly.

"Right, son," he said. "We'll go after Lobo Larson *together.*"

Andrews nodded, swallowed hard, and met Durango's gray eyes steadily. "Yes," he said. "And—and—thanks, Duke!"

Stirrup to stirrup the two men rode across the desert toward Los Verdes.

A NIGHT of horror for Kate Andrews. A day of terror, of burning thirst, of leering, suggestive glances from her ruffian captors, and at last, Kate, from the back of her mount, saw a squalid hamlet of 'dobe shacks.

From the foremost of these strode a tall, gaunt figure of a man. Taller he was than even Durango Duke. Set back in his bony head his eyes, yellow like a tiger's, burned with a suggestion of terrible power. Wide belts, black, and studded with the glistening brass of cartridges, supported two yellow-handled guns at his hips. Like a guardian of old at the gate of an ancient temple, he stood, straight-backed and threatening, in their path.

The cavalcade drew to a halt. Lobo Larson spoke.

"Frio," he said, "we're here."

The tall man nodded; and turned his yellow eyes on the girl.

"The jasper I told yuh about," continued Larson, evilly, "he'll be comin' along—soon."

He grinned suggestively at Frio Ganns, but the tall man's iron features didn't alter. His tawny eyes clung to Kate Andrews. Up and down he measured her with eyes that made the girl's face burn.

"A gal," he said. Kate almost jumped

at its sound. Harsh, like the grating of a rasp on steel. "A gal, Lobo. Yuh didn't tell me about—that."

"No, Frio," explained Lobo apologetically. "I didn't know about her—then," he lied. "I jes' knowed I'd get this Duke jasper down here—some way."

Lobo's coarse face sobered as he looked into the lustful eyes of Frio Ganns. "It don't make no difference, does it?" he asked. "No difference about th' gal bein' here?"

Kate Andrews caught the evident respect in the tone of Lobo Larson as he talked to Frio Ganns. She wondered what this mountain-tall man could be, to earn that respect from Larson.

Behind Ganns she saw the swart, flat faces of many black-eyed natives. Not Mexicans, she decided. Indians—perhaps. And they were! Yaquis! The Yaquis of Frio Ganns!

Ganns wagged his skull-like head at Lobo's question. "No," he replied, "it don't make no difference." He jerked his bony thumb toward the shack on their right. "Bring her in here," he ordered.

Within the shack Frio Ganns, Lobo Larson and his four followers, hunched around a square, hewn table. Kate Andrews huddled, terrified, in one corner of the room. She listened wide-eyed, her ears scarcely able to believe what she heard.

"Yuh see, Frio," Lobo explained, "I coulda got this Duke jasper—mebby—in Hallelujah. But then, mebby again, I couldn't. He's fast—faster'n hell. So I brings th' gal here. He's sweet on her—*sabe?*"

Ganns turned and studied Kate speculatively with his yellow eyes.

"Yeah," he said slowly, "I *sabe.*"

Kate Andrews pulled her skirts more closely about her knees and hid her burning face as Ganns looked at her.

"So, yuh see," Larson's thick lips quirked into a sly grin, "this way, we don't take no chances. Th' five thousan' he brings t' git th' gal goes t' *you,* Frio. I gits th' Duke gent an' turns him over t' yore Yaquis."

Lobo's knuckles whitened on the table edge. "An I watch 'em cut out his liver. An' then—" Lobo hesitated. "An' then, Frio, I done promised m' boys here that they gits th' gal." He jerked his head to indicate his four cronies. "That's fair, ain't it, Frio? Fair all th' way 'round?"

Eyes on the table top, Frio Ganns nodded slightly. He raised his head, then, and glanced sidewise toward the corner of the shack in which Kate crouched in terror. There was a hungry look in those yellow eyes.

A breed girl entered the room. Her gracefully curved brown arms were bare to the shoulders. Her low-cut, flaming-red blouse revealed soft brown curves as she leaned over the table and placed upon it two big brown bottles and six crock mugs. As she arranged the mugs before the men her bright, bird-like brown-black eyes darted swiftly to the white girl in the corner. Her thick, sensuous lips, gently curved drew up into a disdainful sneer.

Frio Ganns studied the little brown girl intently as she padded quickly around the table, then flashed his yellow eyes over to Kate Andrews. The breed girl silently left the room. Again Ganns studied her, her voluptuous back, her bare brown legs and feet. Again he shot a comparative glance at the white girl with the golden hair and clear blue eyes in the corner.

"Well," he finally said, "we'll take a drink. A drink to a square deal all th' way 'round."

Lobo Larson's blue-black eyes held a troubled light. Frio Ganns had not answered his question, and Lobo Larson didn't know what Ganns thought was a square deal all the way around. His sun-darkened forehead was corrugated with worry.

THE desert! Durango Duke sat erect and slim-waisted in his expensive silver-trimmed saddle. Bob Andrews, weak and shaking, gritted his teeth desperately to hang on to his re-born courage.

Guts and guns! The words rang through Andrews' brain like searing things of fire. Guts and guns!

Crunch! Crunch! Each step of their broncs' feet was counted consciously. Each step brought them nearer to Los Verdes—and the guns of Lobo Larson.

Sand. Thirst. Brazen sky.

Cheering, Durango spoke now. "Just a little farther, Bob. You're a real man after all. . . . Hey!" he shouted suddenly. "That wash on th' right—get into it—*quick!*"

Durango Duke's hand cracked on the rump of Andrews' bronc. Bouncing with the frenzied leaps of his own black mare, Duke slid to safety beside Bob Andrews into the six-foot wash.

Off their horses, Durango, with his carbine in his hands, explained over his shoulder.

"Yaquis!" he said. "They'll burn you over a slow fire if they get you. Unlimber your gun and shoot like hell. If they get you, you'll wish to God you *could* die!"

Andrews' red-rimmed eyes, hard with a vengeful light now, focused themselves on Duke's sober face.

"Indians!" he whispered unbelievingly. "Indians!"

Durango nodded. "Yes, Indians!"

And as Durango Duke looked at this pale-faced husband of the girl whom he himself loved, he felt a surge of pity. Pity for a man who didn't have the iron in his system to withstand the rigors of this hard country. Pity for the man who was bravely riding toward the deadly fast and accurate guns of Lobo Larson, with nothing but the remnant of his whiskey-stolen courage to sustain him. Pity—and admiration, too. Durango's cold gray eyes softened as he glanced for that brief instant at Bob Andrews.

"But, Bob," he said reassuringly, "we'll whip them. Don't forget it—we'll whip hell out of them."

Andrews smiled thinly and shook his head. "No," he said, "*we* won't. *You* may, but I won't be much good." He shook his head again. "Me," he said, "I'm everything you've called me. But I'm damned if I'll sit and shiver while you do the fighting. I'll try, Duke."

"That's the stuff," applauded Durango. "Get your carcass up on top of this wash and shoot everything brown that you see."

Rifle in hand, Durango Duke peered over the top of the rise. From the corner of his watchful eyes he saw a new, alert tenseness in the drawn face of the man beside him. Duke smiled whimsically and wondered what Kate would think if she could see Bob Andrews now.

But neither Durango Duke nor Bob Andrews saw a sign of Yaqui. Instead, a voice called from a distance—called in Spanish. Bob Andrews couldn't understand. He turned and watched Durango. Duke replied to the voice in the same tongue. A new light in his eyes, Bob watched him slide down farther in the wash.

Durango shrugged. "Frio Ganns," he explained, "these Yaquis. They said that Ganns wants us brought in without harming us. I asked them if Ganns said we could leave again, and they wouldn't say."

"Frio Ganns?" Andrews squinted his red-rimmed eyes. "Who is Frio Ganns?"

"Worse than Lobo Larson. I knew him a long time ago." Duke spread his hands. "It looks as if we'll have to take a chance. Maybe they'll let us leave, and maybe they won't. This is your party, Bob. What do you say?"

"All right," decided Andrews quickly. "What we have to do, we have to do—don't we?"

Durango grinned, and nodded. Together they arose and stood at the top of the wash, Durango Duke energetically slapping the dust from his black frock coat. From their hiding places in the bush, the Yaquis stepped forward and disarmed them.

Then, mounted on their broncs, amid a band of savages, Durango Duke and Bob Andrews rode captive toward Los Verdes —Frio Ganns—and Lobo Larson.

SWEAT streaked, unkempt, Duke and Andrews stepped into the shack at Los Verdes. The six rannies around the square table looked intently at them. Lobo Larson grinned wolfishly.

Kate Andrews put her hand over her red lips to stifle a scream. Her face paling, she stared at Andrews.

"Bob!" she gasped.

Lobo Larson laughed coldly, and his blue-black eyes held an evil leer. He looked from Durango to Andrews, then to the white-faced girl in the corner. Coarsely he chuckled.

The skull-like face of Frio Ganns didn't change expression. He, too, looked at the girl in the corner, and in his tawny yellow eyes there burned an amber flame of desire.

"Well," said Durango smoothly, bluffing, "the money's in the saddle bags. Get it, and we'll go."

Larson laughed cruelly. "Yeah," he said. "Git th' money, Frio, an' then th' deacon can go. He can go—t' *hell!*" Leaning forward, he spat the words venomously.

Frio Ganns looked curiously at Lobo's snarling, yellow-fanged lips. Turning his bony head, he looked at Durango.

"Howdy, Duke," he said.

"Hello, Frio," replied Duke. "We meet again!"

Ganns nodded, and his fingers worked convulsively. "Larson," he explained to Durango, "wants th' Yaquis t' cut yore liver out." Steadily he regarded Duke's cold eyes. "I'll have t' let 'em do it," he finished.

"Yes?" asked Durango casually.

"Yeah." Frio seemed disappointed at what he saw in Duke's lean face. "Yeah, I'll have t' let 'em do it. If I hadn't promised Lobo"—his iron-hard face distorted with sudden unleashed rage—"I'd find out now if yuh're still as good on th' shoot as yuh was when yuh took that spick gal of mine down Durango way."

"All right," agreed Duke nonchalantly. "I'm ready—either way you place your bets."

Lobo Larson thrust his ugly, head forward. "Don't worry," he spat, loud voiced, "this is one game yuh can't beat." He waved an arm to the others in the room. "Come on," he rasped, "le's go. I wanna see this *bravo* deacon squirm."

Durango eyed him coldly. "You'll be disappointed as hell," he said evenly.

Kate Andrews gasped again. She sprang up and rushed toward Duke. Larson stretched out an arm and hurled her back into the corner.

"Git th' hell back there," he snarled. "Yuh're gonna have a party of yore own purty soon." He grinned at his four henchmen. "Better take 'er away from here," he advised. "Mebby she'll behave somewhat better if she don't see what's gonna come off."

The bull-necked Grogan clutched her arm. Kate screamed and threw an appealing glance at Durango Duke.

Cursing with unexpected ferocity, Bob Andrews surged forward. His fist swung in a wide arc and landed full on Grogan's bulbous nose. There was a plopping sound, and red blood squirted over Grogan's flabby face. He released his clutch on Kate's arm and placed a hand protectingly over his broken nose. With his other hand, Grogan made a swipe at the cursing Bob, who danced back just out of arm's reach.

SNARLING, Larson half raised from his chair, reached over, and batted Andrews over the head with his pistol barrel. Andrews slumped to the floor, blood matting his hair and forming a little pool around his white face. Kate stared, wild-eyed, at her husband lying on the floor. Her breath sucked in in a little hissing sound.

Lobo Larson steadied his gun at Durango Duke. The gambler's eyes had flecks of ice in their gray depths.

Bob Andrews stirred and moaned. One hand reached up weakly and felt of his head.

Larson snarled at him. "When anybody moves around here, Lobo Larson tells 'em when t' do it."

Frio Ganns held his yellow eyes steadily on Lobo. Kate backed away from the heavy-set Grogan. Ganns' eyes caught the movement, and a tiny glint of amusement appeared in their tawny depths. Then they hardened as they swung back to Larson.

"Th' gal," he said, "don't seem t' cotton t' yore men."

Larson shrugged. "What th' hell's th' difference?" he asked. "A bargain's a bargain, ain't it?"

"Yeah," agreed Frio. "No difference. Not much—anyway."

Larson seemed satisfied with that. He turned again to Grogan. "Git her outa here," he snapped. "High-tail it!"

Again Grogan grabbed her arm, while Andrews weakly attempted to rise from the floor. Kate started with Grogan this time, but she kept her eyes fastened to those of Frio Ganns. The three other men started out after Grogan and the girl.

Then Frio Ganns moved the table to one side. He did it with a powerful sweep of one of his long hands that upset the table and brought the bottles and drinking mugs crashing to the floor. Grogan and the others turned abruptly at the noise.

"Wait a minute!" Frio Ganns' voice was suddenly sharp and incisive.

Larson stared intently at him, then stepped back a pace. An abrupt, tense silence settled over the little room. Kate's breathing sounded loud, like hissing steam. Frio jerked a bony thumb at her.

"Come here," he snapped. "Yuh can stay here—with me." His yellow eyes flickered with lambent flame as Kate stepped

obediently toward him. "That'd be better all 'round," he asked, "wouldn't it?"

The girl suddenly halted—dead still. She laughed—throatily—the silvery sound gone, and swayed in her tracks.

"God!" she cried, and brushed her hand across her eyes.

Frio Ganns looked at her, a puzzled expression in his tawny eyes.

Lobo Larson glared angrily at him. "What th' hell?" he asked. "What d'yuh mean, Frio?"

Frio's yellow eyes slitted in his skull-like face. "Th' money's yores, Lobo," he said. "Take it an' git th' hell outa here. Take this Duke fella with yuh. I've decided that I'll keep th' gal."

Larson looked into Frio's eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and closed it, shut tight. He glanced at his four men in the entrance. They edged toward the door. Frio Ganns smiled coldly as he saw them move.

"Go ahead," he said to the hesitating Larson. "Git th' hell outa here, I said." He took a menacing step forward. "Git out!"

Larson backed toward the doorway. Ganns prodded Durango Duke before him.

"Take th' *dinero* if yuh want it," he repeated to the baleful Larson. "Take th' money an' yore Durango Duke. Take 'em—an' don't come back."

WHITE-FACED, Lobo Larson stumbled through the door, followed closely by Durango Duke and Frio Ganns. Under Ganns' two menacing guns, they mounted their broncs.

From the door of the shack there came a throaty rumble. A form hurtled through the air and landed, clawing and clutching, on Frio Ganns' back. The tall, gaunt man gave a violent wrench, and the form on his back fell violently to the ground. Ganns whirled. His hand made a blur of motion.

His gun cracked. Smoke swirled around him.

Kate Andrews, in the doorway, clutched the door jamb and screamed again. The mounted men looked at Bob Andrews' body on the ground. There was a new blood smear on the side of his head. The body lay twisted horribly.

Ganns grunted as he looked at the fallen man. "Humph," he grunted. Then he looked up at Lobo Larson. "All right," he said, "git goin'."

Durango Duke looked behind Ganns, at the crumpled figure of the girl in the doorway. Her face was white, her limbs lay limply as if she had fainted. Under his breath, Duke cursed the skull-faced Ganns. His slender white fingers itched for the feel of his .41's in his hands. Without guns, menaced by the yellow-eyed Frio, the vicious Lobo and the four other gunmen, Durango was helpless.

Larson glared venomously at the gaunt, threatening Frio. "We're goin'," he said, "but we'll be back!"

Ganns took a step forward. In a guttural tongue he threw a command over his shoulder. As he spoke, a dozen Yaquis stepped forward. They held their rifles at a ready.

"Yeah?" sneered Ganns. "Yeah? Yuh'll be back, will yuh? Yuh're mistaken. Yuh won't be back." He flicked a swift glance at Durango Duke, and spoke again in that same guttural tongue.

It seemed to be a question. The Yaquis behind him nodded. One of them answered.

"Yeah," repeated Frio Ganns, "yuh're mistaken. Git off yore broncs. Yuh're stayin' here."

Their faces ashen with sudden fear, Larson and his four men slid cautiously from their mounts. Durango Duke, too, dismounted.

Ganns grinned evilly as he looked from Duke to Lobo.

"We'll have a little fun," he said. He nodded his head at the black-frocked Durango. "This jasper's fast, yuh say, Lobo? Yuh don't know th' half of it. I seen him in action—once. An' now we'll see just how fast yuh *all* are."

The Yaquis surrounding the group were grinning, wide-mouthed. Larson's knees twitched.

"What," he asked, "are yuh gonna do, Frio?"

"Nothin'," said Ganns, his yellow eyes grinning cat-like. "Not a dam' thing. *Yuh're* gonna do it. Yuh're gonna fight this Durango Duke. You and yuh're gunnies. Five of yuh against this Duke gent." He leered at Larson. "That's fair, ain't it?" he asked. "Five t' one?"

Larson's thick lips parted in a wolfish grin, and his blue-black eyes gleamed.

"Then," continued Ganns, enjoying himself hugely, "if yuh kill this fast gent off yuh can go ahead an' leave—mebby."

LARSON'S face fell when Frio said "mebby." He glanced swiftly at the circle of menacing Yaquis. No escape there. At the first false move, Larson knew, the ready savages would pull trigger.

Under the Yaqui rifles the five gunmen were lined up in a row. An Indian produced Durango's two .41's. Carefully Duke examined them, spun the cylinders. Then he slid them under his black coat into their hide-outs. Twenty-five feet away he turned and faced the five gunmen.

Short range! Suicide! Suicide—for somebody.

Ganns grinned as he looked at them. Larson's blue-black eyes wavered a bit as he stared at the cool, erect Durango Duke. Squat, bull-necked Grogan worked his flabby jowls and gazed nervously from behind his pouchy eyelids. Pinto Parsons' pointed Adam's apple jerked convulsively, and the splotches on his face stood out starkly against his tanned skin. The other two gunnies seemed to lose a lot of their confidence as they looked at the poker-faced Durango.

"Remember!" Frio Ganns was talking. "Remember this. When th' rifle goes off, yuh all reach for yore irons. Th' jasper what pulls a gun before that gits turned over t' th' Yaquis. *Sabe* that?"

Larson nodded.

Frio Ganns laughed sneeringly at him. "Hell of a *bravo,*" he jeered, "that yuh turned out t' be. Five t' one, and yuh're scared!"

Lobo Larson said nothing. His thick lips drew back and exposed his crooked yellow teeth. His blue-black eyes were welded to Durango's granite gray ones.

Ganns stepped back. He raised his right hand. Held it poised for an instant. Larson fell into a crouch, the deadly crouch of the gunman. His four rannies watched Duke like birds before a swaying snake. Durango laughed coldly, mirthlessly.

The gaunt man's upraised arm tensed—flashed downward. A rifle cracked!

Like lightning, grunting audibly with the swift effort, the six moved. Rumbling like giant drums, the guns roared.

Staggering back, Durango Duke rolled his light-framed .41's. Orange spurts, like the flicker of snakes' tongues, flashed from his two gun muzzles.

One down! Two!

Durango staggered again. His left gun dropped and his hand hung limply, useless, beside him. His right gun scintillated, roared—again and again.

Three! Four!

Cursing, his voice rising to a crescendo, Lobo Larson dropped his guns. Blood from his throat ran down his chest. His voice bubbled. Durango Duke laughed icily as he watched Larson stumble and fall. Grunting with pain, Durango thumbed his gun again.

Five! All down!

With blood from his wounded side dripping from under his black frock coat—blood from his numbed left arm running down his hand and falling, drop by drop, from the ends of his thin white fingers—Durango Duke tossed his empty remaining gun on the ground in front of Frio Ganns.

The tall, gaunt man looked at him steadily a moment. Duke swayed a bit on his feet. Some of the Yaquis made guttural noises in their throats. All of them stared steadily at him with bright, approving eyes.

"Yuh're all right," said Frio Ganns casually. "Yuh're still pretty fast, all right. Pretty near as good as me."

"I'm a damned sight better than you," said Durango evenly.

Ganns thrust his skeleton face forward. "Yeah?" he asked.

Durango nodded positively. "Yeah," he said. "Better, even with only one arm. Want to try it?"

Ganns grinned evilly. "Humph," he grunted. "A hell of a gent it is," he said, "that fights a fella when he's got 'im already licked."

He looked disgustedly at Durango, as though disappointed in a man of the Duke's accomplishments showing so little *sabe.* He glanced at the two .41's lying on the ground. Then he turned his back and strode toward the 'dobe shack in which the girl lay.

Durango Duke shrugged. Staggering slightly, he followed Ganns. What a man this Frio Ganns could have been, if only fate had cast him in a different role.

KATE ANDREWS was sitting on the floor when Durango Duke and Frio Ganns stepped into the room. A fresh blood smear on the side of his head, Bob Andrews lay with his head in Kate's lap and looked up weakly at the two tall men.

"He's not dead," exclaimed Kate, a queer catch in her voice. "He's going to live."

Frio Ganns looked at her steadily. "Yeah," he apologized. "Mebby so. I'm sorry. I didn't have much time for that shot."

Durango Duke restrained a chuckle.

Ganns poked his gaunt face out of the doorway. Three Yaquis came in at his call. The skeleton head jerked at Duke and Andrews.

"Take them out," he instructed the Yaquis. "Fix up their wounds an' tie them up in th' *casa* at th' end. Leave them for th' night."

Durango started to go. The Indians reached for Andrews. Kate clutched him to her breast. She looked appealingly at Frio.

"Let me stay with him," she begged. "Let me watch him—tonight. *Please!*"

Frio Ganns seemed puzzled. He studied her a moment, then looked at the bloody-headed Andrews.

"Hell," he finally decided. "What's one night, more or less? All right. Watch 'im."

He turned and fixed Durango with his deep-set yellow eyes. "T'morra," he said, "mebby we'll see how fast yuh are with a knife. A knife against some Yaquis!"

Durango nodded confidently. "I'm a better man than you are," he said again, "with *anything!*"

Ganns laughed sardonically. "With women, mebby," he said. "I ain't forgot that spick gal, Durango."

Duke watched him, watched the lean cords in Ganns' leathery neck vibrate as the deep-throated laugh rumbled up from his chest.

The Yaquis prodded Durango from the shack. After bandaging his wounded side and arm, they securely bound him and left him alone in one of the 'dobe huts. Propped against the wall, Durango's wounds throbbed horribly.

Darkness fell, but the pain kept sleep from his weary eyes. Hour after hour passed in unbroken silence, unbroken except for the yelp of a hunting coyote occasionally in the distance.

Then, in the darkness, he heard the soft slip, slip of moccasined feet sliding across the dirt floor of the room. A hand touched his arm—easily. A whisper hissed in his ear.

"Señor!" The voice was tremulous—a girl's. *"Señor Gringo!"*

Durango whispered a hoarse answer.

"Señor Gringo," the girl's voice continued, "me, I'm Frio Ganns' girl. I'm loose you up—*sabe?* I geef you *pistolas* eef you do these theeng for me."

"What thing?"

The small brown hand on Durango's arm clutched fiercely, and Duke winced with the sudden, shooting pain. "You," the breed girl's voice hissed, "you take these *gringo* girl away from my *Señor* Ganns. *Sabe* that?"

The voice contained a subtle threat. Durango whispered an answer. Yes, he'd take the girl away, gladly. He'd take her away from the covetous eyes of Frio Ganns.

A knife grazed his wrists. His arms were free. His smooth-handled .41's were pressed into his hands.

No, he agreed, he would not kill *Señor* Frio. No, not unless he must.

"Bueno," whispered the girl. *"Caballos, señor,* for three will be at these *casa,* in the back."

Like a wraith, melting into the darkness, the breed girl slithered through the doorway and vanished.

Noiselessly Durango loaded his guns. His left arm was sore—but not entirely useless now. Silently he eased out of the door. Like a stalking nemesis, straight backed, somber, noiseless, Durango Duke traversed the row of darkened 'dobe huts.

He stepped within the shack of Kate and Andrews.

Quiet! A warning finger on the startled lips of the girl. Whispered explanations. Then, like shadows, creeping cautiously through the deep shadows between the 'dobes, the three back-tracked.

They found three horses at the last shack. They mounted.

Leather squeaked! A startled Indian yelled.

Then away! Hoofs pounded as they lashed their broncs. A rifle cracked!

Briefly, the flame lighted the darkness. Lead screamed over their heads. Grimly, they rushed on.

THROUGH the night, dashing madly northward, the three fled. Thorn-scratched, their faces lashed by unseen mesquite branches, they fled northward along the almost unseen trail under the stars. Through the night to the next day. Then on into the deep sand desert! Their tired broncs dragged weary feet through the clinging sand. But their riders urged them mercilessly.

Burning sun! Tortuous miles still to go. Frio Ganns and his blood-mad Yaquis not far behind.

Bob Andrews was delirious. He muttered feverishly as he clutched the saddle horn and hung on. Guts and guns! My wife! His five thousand!

Two miles in the distance they sighted a rise—a rock pile, which would make a natural fort.

Dry-throated, Durango croaked: "Hurry! Ride like the devil! If we get there, we can stand them off."

Tongues hanging from their parched mouths, the broncs labored forward. A last final spurt, then Durango Duke, from behind a giant rock, pumped burning lead from the smoking rifle in his hands at the fast-approaching Frio Ganns and his yelling Yaquis.

Stung by bullet-splintered rock, burned by the blazing sun, haggard-eyed, exhausted, the three defenders fought.

Repeatedly Andrews muttered: "Guts and guns!" Then finally sprawled unconscious among the rocks.

A rag on the end of a rifle barrel! A flag of truce.

Frio Ganns strode majestically from behind his rock shield at the foot of the little hill. Durango's finger tightened on the carbine trigger. Ganns came closer. He stopped when Duke could see the sweat streaks on his skeleton-like face.

"Mister fast-gun," Frio called derisively, "I gotta proposition. Wanna hear it?"

Durango stuck his head out from behind his rock breastwork. "Yes," he croaked hoarsely. "Spit it out."

Ganns grinned, tiger-like. "Yuh're fast, Duke," he said. "Pretty dam' fast, ain't yuh?"

Durango just looked at him, waiting. Ganns grinned again.

"Well, mister fast-gun," he continued, "yuh said yuh was a better man than me, huh?"

Duke nodded. "Hell, yes, Ganns," he said, "—a damn' sight."

Ganns nodded his bony head approvingly. "All right," he said, "I'll give yuh a chance t' prove it." He paused and stuck out his iron chin. "We'll fight it out," he challenged. "You an' me—even break."

Durango laughed at him. "Hell, no," he said. "What's in it for *us*, if I do that?"

Frio pointed a bony-knuckled finger at Durango. "This," he said, and Duke saw prideful fire in his yellow eyes. The prideful fire of the gun-fighter. "This is in it," he repeated. "If yuh git me, yuh can take yore pets an' travel. If I git yuh—well—" Frio grinned evilly, "—well—yuh *sabe?*"

Duke sneered at him. "Go to hell," he said distinctly.

"ALL right," Frio Ganns wagged his bony head, "we'll git yuh anyway."

Kate Andrews stepped from behind the rocks and clutched at Durango's arm. From the shelter, Duke heard Bob Andrews' voice moaning in delirium.

"Guts and guns!"

Durango looked into Kate's blue eyes. Frio Ganns grinned hungrily as he saw her.

"He wants," said Kate, "—he wants to fight you—for me?"

Duke nodded. "Yes," he said, "but he can go to hell. We'll whip them all."

"Can we?" she asked. "Can we *really* beat them?"

Ganns laughed harshly as he heard her. Durango didn't answer immediately, and the girl went on:

"Bob," she said softly, "will die here—soon." An odd light appeared in Duke's eyes. "He's different now," continued Kate. "He's got his courage back. *You* did that, Duke. Bob was brave—trying to help me. He ought to have a chance. We shouldn't let him die here."

Duke's eyes flicked from the girl to Ganns and back again. If Bob should die, he—Duke—could win Kate. He was sure of that. That afternoon on the mountain top—the scene arose vividly before his gray eyes now—with Kate in his arms, his kisses on her red lips.

"Don't hold back," continued the girl, entreating, "because you think you're gambling with—with my—my honor. It's terrible—this bloodshed. But if it's the best way—I believe in you, Duke."

Still he stood and stared at her, undecided. He was confident that from behind the rock pile, they could eventually beat off Ganns and his Yaquis. But it would be a matter of hours.

The girl returned to the rock pile and took Andrews' head in her lap. He groaned, and she stroked his forehead with gentle fingers.

Durango Duke looked at Frio Ganns. "All right," he said. "Call out your Yaquis. Let *them* tell me the deal is square, and I'll show you some real gun-work, fella!"

DURANGO DUKE was the gunman again. Jaw thrust forward, he regarded Frio Ganns coldly. Flecks of ice appeared in his hard gray eyes as he watched Ganns' skeleton-like face. Ganns grinned crookedly and called out in that guttural Yaqui tongue.

Full two-score of them there were. Black-eyed, flat-faced, round-muscled warriors. Frio Ganns talked to them, and they all nodded. Durango Duke watched them, saw the eager anticipation in their eyes. Not understanding their Yaqui gutturals, Duke addressed them in Spanish. They all raised their hands when asked to do this in agreement of the compact between the two tall gunmen.

Durango was satisfied. "A good day," he told Frio, "a fine day to kill a skunk." He slipped his guns in their hide-outs.

Frio's tawny yellow eyes blazed, but he kept his tongue between his teeth. He motioned the Indians away. Eyes frozen to Durango's, he backed away a few feet. His thin lips wreathed back into a wicked snarl.

"All right," he said, "all right, gunslick, go ahead an'—!"

Trickster! While he talked—he moved! His hands went gunward like flashes of fire!

Durango Duke leaped into action! His right hand streaking toward the hide-out under his black frock coat, he threw himself sidewise. Cracking spitefully, his iron threw lead!

Burning his side, he felt lead from Frio's guns.

But Frio was wabbling!

Durango grinned, like a killer cat. He shot again! Booming into the ground, Frio Ganns' guns fell from his nerveless fingers.

Durango straightened, eyes on the sprawled form of the gaunt gunman.

The King was dead!

Hard-eyed, Durango looked at the quarter circle of Yaqui faces. Stolidly they returned his gaze, a flicker of admiration in their black eyes. One of them, apparently the leader, raised his arm. Silently, the Indian warriors arose from their squatting position, mounted their broncs and rode slowly away—southward.

A Yaqui keeps his word.

FOUR horses pranced in front of a high-built stage coach before the 'Dobe Dollar saloon and dance hall in Hallelujah. Gray eyes inscrutable, Durango Duke stood in the doorway and watched. Two smiling faces appeared in the windows of the stage coach—the faces of Kate and Bob Andrews. Two hands waved.

With a jingle of the traces and the clop of horses' feet, the stage started with a jerk. Down the sandy, rutted road it creaked, bouncing like a huge rubber ball, swaying like a ship in a gale.

Durango Duke stood in the middle of the street and watched the stage out of sight. Then, slowly, he turned and strode into the 'Dobe Dollar.

Back at his table in the rear of the room he seated himself. He flexed the muscles of his left hand—the muscles in the arm which had been wounded a full month before down at Los Verdes. Absently he toyed with the deck of cards on his table.

Lobo Larson was gone. Frio Ganns was gone. Kate Andrews was gone. None left but himself. He shrugged his shoulders as if to shake off depressing thoughts.

Then, droning monotonously, his voice pushed its way into the noise of the 'Dobe Dollar:

"An open game, gents. A square deal to all. The blue sky of Arizona is the limit. The cases are open—play the game, gents, fair and square. Your bets are called—by Durango Duke."

GUN FOR GUN

By E. R. VANDEBONCOEUR

Grizzled old Sherriff Bill read Hangman Houck's brand. But the law says before you kill a snake you got to see him strike—and that Dot O sidewinder played his long-loop game in the dark.

SHERIFF BILL rose in his stirrups and yelled lustily, waving his arm at the two riders who, far ahead of him, were turning into the Dot-O ranch buildings.

"Hi, Bud!" he bellowed, his leathern old lungs sending the words rolling across the plains.

He saw Bud Stanton swing in his saddle and wave back. He saw Bud's companion lean across his horse's head and say something to the youngster. Then both riders spurred ahead, riding into the yard to dismount, then stalk quickly into the house.

Sheriff Bill's tanned old forehead became a corrugated expanse of brown. Why should young Bud act like that? Ever since his father died, he had come to Sheriff Bill for help and advice. Their relation had been one so close and friendly that Sheriff Bill almost appeared to be his uncle, instead of a rough and ready side kick of those well-remembered days when he and old Growler Stanton had ridden and fought and frolicked together.

The change had come quickly. It had followed close upon the arrival of a stranger at the Dot-O. Bud had introduced him to Sheriff Bill as: "George Parker—I knew him when I was at school in the East."

Sheriff Bill hadn't forgotten that introduction. It had impressed him at the time, for, significantly enough, Bud hadn't said anything about friendship. There was only that, simply: "I knew him when I was at school in the East."

Still, Parker seemed to exert a magical influence over Bud. Little by little, the heir to the rich Stanton spread drew away from the rest of Bitter Creek until, of a sudden, he surprised everyone by importing a new foreman and discharging several of his father's old and trusted hands.

Bitter Creek raised its collective eyebrows when the new foreman appeared in

town for the first time, announcing himself to be Hangman Houck. Yes, Bitter Creek knew of him; as did everyone in West Texas. His nickname was well earned. It fell upon his shoulders after a bitter water rights feud down in Presidio—a feud which he settled by expeditiously stringing up three opposing ranchers. That is, everyone said he was the executioner, but no one ever proved it.

He had accepted the nickname with complacence. In fact, he showed considerable pride in it. His ranch and water rights, however, lasted only a short time. People don't hang in the State of Texas, County of Presidio, to wipe out back taxes, nor do they hang bank trustees for demanding protection for mortgages.

So Hangman Houck had moved out of Presidio and here, of a sudden, he bobbed up, squat and powerful as a bull, pugnacious and aggressive, grinning and secretive.

AND Bud—Sheriff Bill wanted to talk to him on a matter of importance. The young rancher's evident evasion of him only spurred the old fellow's determination. He clucked to Mooney and rode on, turning across the range in a bee-line for the Dot-O buildings. Whatever might be stirring in his cunning old brain, his face gave no sign of it. He was smiling genially as he rode up to the house and saw Hangman Houck leaning lazily against the hitching rail, chewing a stalk of straw and eying the rider closely.

"Howdy," said Sheriff Bill as he pulled Mooney up.

"Howdy yoreself," answered Hangman Houck. "Whadda yuh want?"

"Jest thought I'd stop in an' have a little gab with Bud," said Sheriff Bill. "Is he around?"

"Yeh, he's here," said Houck tersely. He jerked away from the rail suddenly, his hands sliding to his hips. "But he don't crave to see yuh an' it's putty near time yuh woke up to it."

"Why, now, Houck," protested Sheriff Bill, similingly, "I don't b'lieve yuh understand. Bud an' me's friends. He'll want to see me; shore he will. Ah, howdy, Bud," he called, for there, unexpectedly, was Bud, standing in the doorway. Over his shoulder, Sheriff Bill could see George Parker and Parker spoke quickly.

"Why don't you get some sense, and clear out?" he demanded. "Bud doesn't want you here."

"Reckon that ain't so; is it, Bud?" Sheriff Bill queried.

"Yes, it's true," said Bud. His eyes wavered and fell beneath the old man's puzzled stare. "I don't want you to come here any more."

"But, Bud," protested Sheriff Bill. "I come f'r yore own good. That money yore a-shippin' in from Fort Hancock. Yuh mustn't do it, Bud. It ain't safe. I—"

"I'll take care of my own affairs," said Bud, uneasily. "That's all." Abruptly he swung on his heel and vanished into the house. Sheriff Bill turned to Hangman Houck. The fellow's bull neck was hunched low, his jaw thrust out. There was an impudent grin overspreading his face.

"Sorry yuh gotta be leavin', Sheriff," he said with biting sarcasm. "Come ag'in when yuh c'n stay longer."

THE rickety old coach swayed and rattled and jounced and creaked as Pudge Forsythe kept his team plugging away. Behind Pudge, on the long seat atop the coach, sat two men. Across their knees they held rifles and on the seat between them was a gray, canvas bag, its mouth secured with a chain and a padlock.

Pudge wasn't letting his horses loaf this trip. He didn't like carrying insured stuff and armed guards. Run 'em into Bitter Creek an' peg 'em off—that's all he wanted to do.

A steep rise in the road loomed ahead. It was one of those abrupt stony lifts and it swung around a great rock as it shot up. Pudge shook out his reins.

"At it, yuh long-eared mules!" he sang cheerily. The horses lengthened their stride and raced up the slope. They hit the bottom at a dead run, but they hauled the coach only crawlingly over the top, for it was a steep pull with a heavy, old wagon.

And at that slow-paced instant, a man stepped briskly from a clump of brush at the foot of the rock, reached up and gripped the baggage rack, then lifted both booted feet to the projecting end of the

rusty set of rear springs. The man's hat was down over his eyes and a handkerchief covered his face. With the normal jolt and bouncing of the old coach, his arrival was unnoticed until, suddenly, one of the guards felt something cold and round pressing against the back of his neck. Pudge's steeds had just began to pick up speed again, but the guard knew his stuff. He yelled:

"Hi, Pudge! Stop!"

Pudge hauled back on his reins, cussing mildly, turned and then gaped. Both guards had their hands in the air and Pudge, after a moment's pugnacious reflection, decided to follow their prudent example. The bandit reached forward, plucked away the guards' rifles, one at a time, and tossed them into the woods alongside the road. Then, with his gun centering perfectly on a point just between Pudge's two eyes, he nodded to the driver. Pudge shrugged resignedly. He took his gun from its holster—very gingerly, you may be sure—and chucked it after the rifles.

The bandit relaxed. He hooked the precious canvas bag from between the two guards with the toe of his boot and pulled it back. Then he snuggled it into the crook of his arm, reached the ground in a pair of nimble hops and waved at Pudge with his revolver.

"Giddap!" yelped Pudge bitterly and cracked his whip smartly behind the ears of his team. The stage coach started with a jerk that nearly sent the two guards tumbling backward. They rounded a turn and Pudge, looking back resentfully, saw the robber still standing in the middle of the road, watching.

Then the stage rounded a turn.

Unarmed as they were, neither Pudge nor the guards thought of anything but continuing into Bitter Creek. There they knew they would find Sheriff Bill. So Pudge, muttering unprintable things, urged his steeds on.

THEY were about ten miles from Bitter Creek when Pudge got his second shock of the day. The coach swung around a bend in the road and there, blocking the way, were two men on foot, rifles at their shoulders. Black cloths masked their faces. One of the riflemen fired coolly and deliberately. The shot clipped Pudge squarely in the shoulder.

"Gol dang yore orn'ry hides, this here is gettin' to be wearin' on a guy's nerves," yelled Pudge, angrily.

"Shet yore face," snapped one of the hold-up men. "We want that express bag."

Pudge forgot his wounded shoulder for an instant and grinned in malicious glee.

"Yah," he said derisively. "Yo're too late. A tough hombre clumb us a spell back an' took the bag."

"Yo're a liar!" snarled the hold-up man.

Pudge grinned into his face. It was the first ray of sunlight in a dull day for the chunky little driver.

"C'mon up an' see f'r yoreself," he invited, cordially. "The door's open an' the welcome mat's out."

The bandit motioned to his companion, who clambered up quickly, taking care not to get between the trio atop the coach and his partner's gun. One glance showed the top empty. He swore fluently.

The bandit on the ground trained his gun on Pudge.

"Where's that bag?" he demanded. "Tell me or I'll plug yuh colder'n turkey."

"Plug away," said Pudge pleasantly, "an' be damned."

Whereupon he turned his gaze upon the surrounding scenery and began whistling softly.

The bandit questioned the two guards. For an instant, Pudge actually thought he was going to shoot one of them down in cold blood. But at last the outlaw seemed convinced that they were telling the truth. Still muttering, he and his partner unhitched the horses from the coach, turned them loose with kicks and shouts and vanished into the brush.

It took fifteen minutes to round up the horses anld re-harness them. Then Pudge set out again for Bitter Creek.

NEWS that the stage was bringing in a consignment of cash had spread over some grapevine route as if by magic, and there was a sizable crowd of waddies loafing about in front of the Best Bet as stage time approached. Sheriff Bill slouched in his quiet corner where he was joined by Hank Walters.

"Is this here gossip right about some

crazy notion Bud's got—shippin' some money in by stage?" Hank inquired.

Sheriff Bill nodded.

"Huh!" snorted Hank in friendly badinage and with a beautiful disregard for his own sixty years, "what a smart herd of burros them insurance fellers must be to ask a worn-out ol' battleax like yuh to take care of their dinero!"

Before Sheriff Bill had a chance to make a retort, Hank looked out the window. "Well, yuh won't have to watch that there five thousand long, 'cause here's Bud an' that Parker hombre a-ridin' in, now."

A cloud of dust far down the road heralded the approach of the tardy Pudge. Sheriff Bill consulted his watch again. Twenty minutes late. He shook his head.

The faces of the guards and the red stain that overspread Pudge's shirt told the whole story, even before the coach had pulled up to a dust-clouded stop. Through the excitement that followed, young Bud stood as though dazed, but Parker raved and swore—swore strange oaths that the cowpunchers gaped at, for they were alien to the Panhandle. And Hangman Houck, black-browed and lowering, glared from face to face suspiciously and pugnaciously, as though he suspected every man in the group.

"You, Houck!" exclaimed Parker at last. "What are you standing there for? Get busy. We've been robbed, you thick-headed fool! Get after them. You, too, Sheriff. Why in hell can't we get some action here?"

"Yeh," agreed Sheriff Bill, "guess that's my job, right enough. C'mon, fellers." The posse lit out with a clatter of hoofs.

SHERIFF BILL led the way, with Hank Walters and Joe Adams riding hard at his side. He waved to Hangman Houck and the Dot-O foreman drew into the knot of leaders.

"So long's the second hold-up didn't get nothin', seems like we might as well head right f'r where the first hombre unloaded the money bag," he shouted jerkily as the horses raced on at unabated speed. The others nodded agreement, even Hangman Houck, and they swept on. But only for a few minutes. Then Sheriff Bill, catching Hank Walters' eye, jerked his head. Hank nodded his understanding. Gradually Sheriff Bill slowed down, unnoticed, and Hank followed suit. When they were riding at the rear of the posse, Sheriff Bill reined up beside Hank and shouted:

"How's yore eyes?"

Hank grinned.

"Better'n yore'n. Why?"

"Brush Creek's where Pudge was hopped the second time. When we pass it, drop out, quiet-like, an' start seein' what yuh c'n see. I'll attend to the other deal." Hank nodded and Sheriff Bill kicked Mooney lightly in the ribs, and pulled up to the fore again.

He kept his posse hard at work all that afternoon and refused to give up until dusk fell. In spite of his gray hair and his stooped shoulders, he was tireless as he led the cowpunchers, like quartering bloodhounds, over the ground. At first the trail was easily picked up. They found the place where the bandit had left his horse as he staged his surprise party, and followed the animal's trail as easily as a roadway for a short distance. Then they came upon a stony, arid stretch of several square miles, where the rock and hard-as-iron, sun-baked earth told them nothing. It was a tired and discouraged band of riders that jogged back into Bitter Creek that night and, to add to their discouragement, a drizzle of rain began falling, heralding an unseasonal all-night downpour that would effectively wash away any further chance of tracing the successful thief. Or the unsuccessful ones, for that matter.

TIRED and wet, the riders clustered around the bar, but Sheriff Bill, spying Hank Walters in the cronies' favorite corner, motioned to the bartender, who slid him one of his pet, long-necked bottles. Then Sheriff Bill retired to the corner table with it.

"How was yore eyes, Hank?" he asked casually, as he poured a stiff jolt. Hank grinned cheerfully.

"Jest like I said," he boasted. "An' I been back more'n two hours, a-waitin' f'r a blind ol' bat to find his way home."

"Jest skip yore misbegotten idee of humor,' suggested Sheriff Bill, "an' tell me what yuh found." So Hank leaned across the table and told him. Sheriff Bill listened

attentively, sipping slowly as he did so, and when Hank had finished his only comment was a grunt.

"Whadda yuh make of it?" demanded Hank.

"This an' that," said Sheriff Bill vaguely.

"I know the signs," complained Hank. "Yo're gonna keep what yuh know—pervidin' yuh know anythin'—to yoreself. All right, yuh clam! But don't ask me to help yuh no more."

"Not," said Sheriff Bill, "ontil the next time. Here, have a snort of this here nose paint."

For the next few weeks, Sheriff Bill was a rather quiet citizen. He rode quite a bit, was not often in town, covered a great deal of ground and, apparently, got no place. In addition, he wrote one or two letters which, in itself, was a tremendous effort on his part, for Sheriff Bill was not an accomplished or a willing pencil wielder. He preferred, whenever possible, to say what he had to say face to face with folks. And he always had found that to be the most satisfactory method. But necessity made him sharpen his pencil.

On his report, the insurance company granted Bud Stanton's claim for the five thousand dollar loss and again Bud insisted that the money be delivered to him as the original shipment had been ordered — in cash. The insurance company, however, demanded Sheriff Bill's guarantee that the money would be protected and Sheriff Bill gave it.

But he gave it on condition that he should be the only person in Bitter Creek to be notified of the date of the shipment and he made doubly certain by taking a trip —most unusual for Sheriff Bill—to Fort Hancock, where he boarded the stage with Pudge Forsythe and rode through to Bitter Creek, with the bag of crisp, fresh bills jammed under his seat and the insurance company's courier riding inside the coach as a passenger.

HIS two-day absence was suddenly made clear to Hank Walters who, lazing on the porch of the Best Bet, snapped to alertness as he saw Sheriff Bill, dusty and grinning, climbing down from the coach with the padlocked bag under his arm.

"Hi, Hank," Sheriff Bill hailed him. "Git a horse f'r my friend here an' we'll take a little ride."

In less than five minutes they were riding out of town, headed for the Dot-O, the insurance messenger hobbing painfully up and down, although Sheriff Bill kept the pace down with due consideration.

Hangman Houck must have seen them coming from some distance, for Sheriff Bill saw him riding hastily toward the house as they came in sight of the Dot-O buildings. When the trio jogged up, Houck, Parker and young Bud were standing in front of the house, waiting. Significantly enough, there were several other riders lounging around, with nothing, apparently, to do for the moment. The messenger dismounted stiffly and Sheriff Bill and Hank swung down.

"Bud," said Sheriff Bill, "I brung yuh that money from the insurance company."

"Give it to me," said Bud abruptly, holding out his hand.

"Jest a minute," said Sheriff Bill. "Bud," he said, "yuh don't know what'll happen if I leave this money with yuh. An' "—he added significantly—"neither do I."

"Give it to me," Bud snapped curtly.

Sheriff Bill glanced at Hank Walters. The old fellow's jaw was set hard as a rock. Sheriff Bill had reached the end of his rope. He shrugged and handed over the bag. Bud signed the messenger's receipt and the deal was over—so far as the messenger was concerned.

It was a silent ride back to town. The messenger was glad his responsibility was over, but he sensed something wrong which he was unable to understand, but tactfully said nothing. Hank tried to talk just once.

"If ol' Growler Stanton coulda heard young Bud a-talkin' to yuh like that—" But Sheriff Bill choked him off.

"Don't say it, Hank," said Sheriff Bill quietly. "Don't say nothin' f'r a while. I got a creepin' feelin' that if we say too much agin him, we're likely to feel right bad about it some day."

BACK in Bitter Creek, Sheriff Bill spent a strangely silent and dreamy afternoon. Hank's efforts to rouse him to conversation failed. He sat with his chair tilted back against the wall and with his sombrero pulled down over his eyes. You

might have thought he was sleeping, but he wasn't. And Hank, recognizing the signs, at last desisted and left him to his thoughts.

The sun slipped over the horizon and cool, friendly dusk dropped her mantle over Bitter Creek. The usual crowd of carefree, roistering cowhands began to fill the Best Bet.

And Sheriff Bill, unable longer to endure the inactivity, arose from his seat, clumped out of the place, mounted Mooney and rode off into the soft, star-studded evening. The fresh, moist evening air filled his lungs and the wrinkles vanished from his forehead. He muttered to himself and swung Mooney toward the Dot-O ranch.

In a clump of trees, not far from the ranch buildings, Sheriff Bill dismounted. There was enough star and moon light so that he could see anyone entering or leaving the place. He squatted at the base of a tree, leaned his broad back comfortably against the rough, friendly trunk and prepared himself for a long vigil.

Hours dragged on. The old fellow hauled out his watch again and grunted in relief. It was three o'clock and, in another hour, the first hint of dawn would be lighting the eastern skies. He arose for one last stretch. But he didn't stretch. He searched the blackness with his eyes. and warningly on Mooney's velvet nose. He searched the blackness with his eyes.

Then he saw it—a moving shape approaching from off where the bunkhouse slumbered. Sheriff Bill leaned slightly forward like some wary old hawk and strained his eyes. Even in the pre-dawn blackness, the figure became recognizable. Hangman Houck! And then, unexpectedly, a light blinked in the ranchhouse.

Houck stopped for a moment, then went forward again. There was no stealth in his tread. He walked up to the rear door and vanished inside. Another light appeared. Sheriff Bill waited tensely. For a brief instant he thought of following Houck inside, then he remembered the confidence of Houck's stride and the fact that it was nearly time for the ranchhouse to bestir itself, anyway. Perhaps Houck's visit and the lighted windows meant nothing, after all. In that case, he would only betray the fact that he was keeping a watch on the ranch. No, he must wait. And he did. He waited impatiently for nearly an hour.

Then he heard the creak of an opening door. He peered through the gloom and saw two men emerge from the ranchhouse. One of them carried a bundle under his arm. Sheriff Bill's eyes narrowed grimly. Evidently Hangman Houck had horses ready and waiting, for the two men went toward the corrals, vanishing in the distance, and almost immediately the sound of softly padding hoofs reached Sheriff Bill's ears.

The old fellow swung into the saddle and sent Mooney cautiously after the two fugitives, carefully and slowly drawing up on them. He had been in the saddle for less than five minutes, however, when a thought hit him with a jolt like a blow between the eyes. He hauled back on the reins and sat listening. The two riders ahead were trotting steadily north. He swung Mooney like a flash and sent him racing back to the ranch.

Out of the saddle in a flying leap as Mooney swung up to the house, he went to the back door and knocked. No answer. He tried the knob and found that the door was locked. Without ceremony, he kicked it down and jumped inside. He struck a match, found and lighted a lamp, then started a room-to-room search. Bud was not anywhere to be found. He went back to the kitchen, and stared out the door at the bulking shadow of the barn.

ICY fingers clutched at Sheriff Bill's heart. Young Bud—old Growler Stanton's kid—was he—? Sheriff Bill went down the back steps on the jump. Holding the lamp aloft, his great old hand shaking slightly, he carefully searched the shadows and then turned the corner of the barn.

Right then his hand ceased to shake. It was steely firm. A cold, killing light gleamed in his eyes. Hangman Houck had once more made good his nickname. Sheriff Bill didn't have to make an examination of the gruesome shape swinging from the cottonwood limb. He knew he was too late. He blew out the light, and mounted Mooney. For the first time in months he let the game little cow pony feel the touch of a rowel.

HANGMAN HOUCK and Parker trotted briskly on through the graying dawn. They neared the foothills of the Sierra Prietas. The hint of a dim light broke over the peaks of the range. Off to the east it was nearly full daylight. Far ahead, a tiny column of smoke arose. Parker looked at Hangman Houck uneasily. Houck grinned evilly.

"That's Barton. Jest crawled out, prob'ly. He's ridin' the line up here. Dot-O range ends at the foot of the hills."

"We'll swing around and circle him," said Parker.

"No, we won't," snapped Hangman Houck. "I've got a score to square with that hombre. We'll ride right in."

So they rode into Barton's lonely little camp. He was already up and was busy skinning a dead steer. He straightened up as he heard the riders and waved as they rode in.

"Howdy, Houck," he greeted. "Dam' fool cows can't keep their laigs out'n holes. Third one this week. What're yuh doin' out so early?"

"I'm goin' away, Barton," said Houck coldly.

Barton's eyes flashed. Rage flooded his face.

"Yo're stayin' here, Houck, ontil yuh settle with me," he yelled. He had not yet buckled on his belt and now he bent over to snatch his gun.

Deliberately and as calmly as though he were at target practice, Houck drew his revolver and fired. The bullet hit Barton behind the ear and he sagged forward. It happened so suddenly and with such a lack of warning that Parker was thunderstruck.

"You fool," he snapped, "what did you do that for?"

"That's my bus'ness," responded Houck. "His coffee's boilin'. Let's light an' have a cup before we ramble." And he swung down as though nothing had occurred.

The camp was screened from the level range by a circle of trees and brush and it rested upon a slope, slightly higher than the hundreds of acres of rich grazing land. Thus located, it had a clear view of miles toward the south.

So it was that, a short time later, Hangman Houck abruptly paused with his untasted coffee halfway to his lips and pointed. Parker, following his finger with a startled eye, saw a horseman racing along the trail.

Consternation crossed his face. Both men, even at that great distance, recognized the rider and they knew why he was pushing his horse so hard. Parker's first thought was of flight, but Hangman Houck, with a cunning smile, caught his arm.

"Tie my hands behind this tree," ordered Houck. "Be quick! Tie 'em good, too, because he's too foxy to be fooled by a flimsy knot." Parker worked feverishly and bound Houck's wrists firmly.

"Now git into that brush an' wait f'r yore chance. Don't shoot him onless yuh have to. I'm achin' to tend to him myself. Git, yuh bonehead!" Parker vanished into the scrub growth that encircled the camp.

It was there Sheriff Bill found Hangman Houck when he rode up. Gun in hand, he dismounted; his keen old eyes darted around. But there was no sign of another living soul. On the ground lay Barton, dead. Barton's horse and Houck's were unconcernedly champing grass. Sheriff Bill walked slowly around Houck, saw that the knots binding his wrists were genuine—were, indeed, painfully tight. Then, for the first time, he lent an ear to Houck's ravings.

"That coyote, Parker," the bound man was saying, his speech embroidered with profanity, "I chased him up here. Barton was dead, an' Parker cracked me over the haid with a club. When I come to, he had me hog-tied an' was on his way."

Sheriff Bill considered grimly.

"Ontie me," sputtered Houck, "an' let me go 'long with yuh. If I git my hands on him—"

Sheriff Bill fell for the story not at all, but he wanted to see what Houck's game was. He had to holster his gun in order to use his big, gnarled fingers on the tight knots and, as he bent over his work, something round and hard jammed viciously into the small of his back and Parker's grating voice said:

"Reach f'r the sky, mister!"

THERE was only one thing to do. Sheriff Bill reached. Parker lifted his gun from its holster and slipped it inside his own belt. Then he stepped back, still covering Sheriff Bill. The old fellow

looked at Houck and that worthy's face was covered with an ear-to-ear grin.

"All right, Parker," said Hangman Houck. "Ontie me an' lemme tend to this meddlin' ol' fool."

Sheriff Bill was thinking fast. He sized up the precious pair and decided to play his cards, here and now. So, as Parker reached for Hangman Houck's wrist bindings, he spoke suddenly:

"Jest a minute, Parker," he said, staring unblinkingly into the muzzle of the other's gun. "I know yo're a-gonna bump me off an' yuh got me flat-footed. But I got somethin' to tell yuh before yuh turn that hombre loose."

Surprise spread over Hangman Houck's brutal face. Then apprehension.

"Never mind him," he snapped. "Cut me loose an' be quick about it!"

Parker glanced from Houck to Sheriff Bill and the old fellow felt a glow of satisfaction as he read suspicion in Parker's gaze.

"Not so fast, Houck," said Parker slowly. "I'll listen. Spit it out, old man, and no monkey business, because it'll be a real pleasure to make a sieve out of you. What is it?"

"Well, now," drawled Sheriff Bill, "mebbe it ain't important, but I jest thought I'd tell yuh that I had a fella backtrack over the trail of them two birds that held up the stage coach an' didn't get nothin'. That was before the rain. An' one of 'em was yore friend, Hangman Houck."

"Yo're a liar," screamed Houck. He strained at his bonds, but they held. "Ontie me, Parker," he yelled, "an' lemme get my hands on him."

"An' the other road agent was Barton, there," said Sheriff Bill coldly, nodding at the dead man. "I s'pose Houck figgered it'd be a good idea to shut him up f'r good before he pulled out. I know what yo're thinkin'," he added, interpreting Parker's expression of mingled rage and perplexity. "Houck was there when the stage was due, all right, but he made it by takin' a short cut acrost the hills an' if yuh remember, he wasn't more'n a coupla minutes before the scheduled time. He swung around Bitter Creek, picked up a fresh horse he had cached, an' jogged into town, smart as a weasel."

Parker was livid with fury. He swung on Houck.

"You double-crossin' sneak!" he raged. "So you tried to beat the wire on me!"

"Wait a minute," counseled Sheriff Bill, warily watching Parker, who, even in his rage, kept his gun upon the old fellow. "That ain't all. I got some news f'r Houck, too. Yuh know who robbed the coach an' got that bag jest before yuh pulled yore holdup? Why, Houck, yuh'd never guess. It was me!"

"You!" Parker glared. "But—but—"

"Uh, huh," said Sheriff Bill. "Reckon I understood. Yuh know why he's so excited right now, Houck? Well, I'll tell yuh. That there bag didn't have no five thousand dollars in it. All it had was a lot of cut-up newspapers."

He grinned. Houck's jaw had dropped. Parker's furtive eyes were shifting uneasily.

"I didn't say nothin' about it, 'cause I was tryin' to find out what yore game was. I done a little checkin' up an' I found out that Parker's got a cousin workin' in that bank at Fort Hancock!"

For a minute, Sheriff Bill thought that Houck was going to break loose. He heaved and struggled and cursed and tore at his bonds. Once Parker raised his gun, but changed his mind when he saw that Houck's lashings were doing their work well, in spite of the rider's bull-like strength.

"That settles your hash, Houck," said Parker bitterly. "You stay tied up. I'm going to perforate this nosey old fool and get out of here. Five thousand tied behind my saddle and five thousand more waiting in Fort Hancock is good enough for me. Well, I don't have to split with you now." He walked around Houck slowly, inspecting his bonds. "Guess I'll make you just a little tighter before I go," he said, grinning evilly. He looked around. There was not another inch of rope in sight. Sheriff Bill stood watching quietly. Finally he spoke.

"Bein' a critter with a passion f'r seein' that everythin's done right an' proper, I got a suggestion, if yuh c'n postpone killin' me long enough," he said dryly. "There's the hide Barton musta skinned off'n the cow. Cut a few strips outa it an' use 'em."

SATISFACTION gleamed in his watery blue eyes as Parker bent over, without laying down his gun, picked up the dead cowhand's knife and cut four long strips from the slick, wet hide. He tossed them on the ground beside Houck and motioned toward them with his gun.

"Get busy," he snapped at Sheriff Bill. "Tie him tight to the tree, standing. Tie around his ankles, his knees and his neck. That'll hold him." Sheriff Bill obeyed, meekly enough, and Houck kept firing a constant string of abuse and threats at his double-crossing partner.

Sheriff Bill tied the final knot and stepped back. Parker raised his gun to finish his other captive. Sheriff Bill's mind worked like lightning. Anything for a second or a minute of delay. His gaze flashed around. It penetrated the brush across the trail and picked out the edge of the cliff.

It was not a natural cliff; it was a man-made one. Once it had been a part of the long, gentle slope of the foothills, but old Growler Stanton had put a small army of men at work and had moved a great bite of earth out of the grade for filling purposes. So that, where the diggers had left off, an artificial cliff rose thirty feet above the bottom of the three-sided pit. In fact, as Sheriff Bill knew, the earth had crumbled away under the lip of the cliff, so that only the sod was holding it up at the very edge.

Parker's finger was tightening upon the trigger when Sheriff Bill spoke.

"Not here, Parker," he said quietly. "I don't wanta disturb yore friend." He smiled genially at Houck. "An' besides, I'd shore hate to be found in his comp'ny, even dead. Wait! I ain't askin' much. We'll jest go across the trail there. Yuh oughta humor a man that's as good as dead."

Parker glanced at the sun. It was full above the horizon now and he was impatient to be on his way.

"All right," he decided, "get going. Walk in front of me and keep those hands high, because I'm going to let you have it on the spot if you drop them an inch." Sheriff Bill walked slowly ahead of him and Parker, taking no chances, pressed the muzzle of his gun tight against the old fellow's back. Just a light pressure of Parker's trigger finger and it would be all other. Sheriff Bill had no delusions about that. There was just one chance and he knew it.

Across the trail he stepped and walked through the light underbrush. He neared the cliff and, treading heavily, deliberately turned along the very edge. Parker kept tight at his back. Sheriff Bill tramped more solidly, yet unostentatiously. He felt the ground beneath his boots shake slightly and he held his breath, hoping.

And then, suddenly, it happened. Without warning—to the unsuspecting Parker, at any rate—the earth broke loose beneath the weight of the two men. A strip fully three feet wide sagged for one breathless second, then sent them plunging downward. Sheriff Bill never lowered his arms. He went down with both hands still in the air and that, probably, saved his life, for Parker had no warning of his peril from the old fellow's attitude, until the earth, falling away beneath his feet, sent him toppling and, naturally, waving his arms in a fight to retain his balance.

For a flashing fraction of a second, Sheriff Bill was aware that he was falling. Then a big rock, joining the avalanche, hit him behind the ear and a wave of blackness engulfed him.

IT was nearly dusk on the following day when Hank Walters and Joe Adams led their searching party into the foothills. As they started up the trail in the direction of Barton's camp, they heard a voice calling feebly.

Horses and all, they pushed through the brush, swung downhill and turned into the great scar the diggers had left in the face of the hill. There they found Parker, but they had no more business with him. He was dead, his neck broken in the long tumble.

And there, too, they found Sheriff Bill, his tanned old face drawn with pain and suffering, but with the crinkles springing into life at the corners of his eyes as he saw the riders.

"Howdy, boys," he said genially. "Yuh'll have to excuse me f'r not risin' to greet my guests, but I done a high dive off'n that there cliff yesterday mornin' an' I been havin' some trouble with my laigs. Reckon I must've thrown a shoe."

Hank Walters was beside him in a jiffy. Sheriff Bill was, indeed, having "some trouble" with his legs. His left leg was broken in two places and his right ankle was swollen so badly that they had to cut his boot off. He had been unable to do more than drag himself away from the foot of the cliff and there he had lain, waiting for help that he knew would come.

"Hey!" ejaculated Hank, suddenly remembering the origin of all the trouble. "How about Hangman Houck? He got away, eh?"

"No," said Sheriff Bill slowly. "He didn't get away. Not none. He's up in Barton's camp. An' I reckon he's some dead by now."

Joe Adams led the other riders a merry chase up the slope and, as they burst into the camp clearing, they reined in their horses and gaped. Hangman Houck was dead, right enough, and he had died as Sheriff Bill promised he would—choking in the grip of a noose. His limbs, as he stood against the tree, were horribly constricted. His face was the blue of a hanged man.

For green rawhide will shrink and harden like iron. For two full days, Hangman Houck had been strapped there in blazing hot Texas sun and the rawhide strips had shrunk steadily, tightening and binding.

Particularly the strip with which Sheriff Bill had lashed Hangman Houck's neck tightly to the trunk of the tree.

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BLACK HORSEMAN OF THE BADLANDS

By WALT COBURN

THERE were six fresh bullet holes in the wooden slab that marked the grave of Bob Hutton.

Which meant that Pablo Costello had returned from the Chihuahua country and was back in Baja California. That Pablo had ridden along that trail and had halted long enough to pay that sinister tribute to the dead man buried there. For whenever Pablo rode past Bob Hutton's grave he always emptied his six-shooter at the already riddled wooden slab. Even as he had, some five years ago, emptied his gun at the living Hutton.

Pablo Costello would never cease to hate Bob Hutton. Nor would he ever cease to love the girl that the gringo had stolen away from him. Stolen, like a damned thief in the night.

Pablo had overtaken the pair at the mouth of Las Cruces canyon. There, within a stone's toss of the big oak tree

One moment he sang soft love songs under the Border moon. The next, his fury guns spat screaming death. Lover or longrider, Sonora's mightiest pistoleers walked softly when the Black Rider of the Badlands rode from the midnight hills.

with the swinging limb where Pablo and Margarita had sat so often when the moon was round, Pablo had caught up with them. And there, with Margarita Mayo to watch, Pablo had killed Bob Hutton, without compassion, even as he might have shot down a mad dog.

Those who saw would not soon forget that evening, when Pablo Costello rode into Ensenada with Margarita Mayo. He rode ahead of her, with never a backward glance. His face was that of a man fresh from hell. Tall, straight backed, head held high, he rode to the old *casa* that had been, for some generations, the home of the Mayo family. His dark eyes were seared with red, and the mouth under the slim black mustache was a twisted, lipless line.

Tearless, white as marble, Margarita Mayo sat her horse. In her veins flowed the purest blood of Castile and the blood of Ireland. A woman of courage, the Señorita Mayo, the most beautiful girl in all of Baja California. She had need of that courage now.

She slid, unassisted, from her side-saddle. Proudly, with firm step, but with a stricken look in her deep blue eyes, she followed Pablo Costello up the tiled walk to the veranda of the old *casa*. Her aunt, the only relative she had in the world, came out of the hacienda and met them. The aunt's smile chilled when she saw the look on their faces.

"*Madre de Dios,* my children, what has happened?" she cried.

"I am returning her into your keeping, *tia mia,*" said Pablo in a toneless voice. He raised his sombrero, turned and left. The chiming of his Amozoc spurs as he departed was oddly like the laughter of a man doomed to die.

PABLO COSTELLO gave himself up to the *alcalde,* who was an old friend of Pablo's dead father.

To the white-haired *alcalde* Pablo told a brief, bitter story. The gringo who lay dead with six bullets through his heart was an evil man whose intentions had been bad. Hutton already had a wife whom he made work in a cantina. Before that evil gringo had the opportunity to ruin the life of Margarita Mayo, as he had ruined the lives of other innocent girls who had been fascinated by his handsome face and his lying promises, Pablo Costello had killed him.

As it turned out, it was the brittle testimony of Bill Edson, boss of the Circle Cross, that saved Pablo Costello from punishment at the hands of the law. In forceful, straightforward words the Circle Cross foreman gave a true picture of Bob Hutton. Pablo was set free.

From that day, no person ever saw Margarita Mayo outside her own garden. Those who caught a glimpse of her said that she was as pale as a nun and dressed always in black.

So Pablo Costello rode his way. He had made a record for himself in Chihuahua and Sonora during the revolutions. Men said of him that he bore a charmed life. He was the idol of the army. Women fell madly in love with him. He was all that a woman might desire. Tall, slim waisted, wide of shoulder. The manners of a true *caballero,* a ready wit, polished, daring, handsome.

And whenever he rode that trail that led him past the grave of Bob Hutton, he would empty his gun at the wooden slab. He hated the dead man with that same fierce, untamed hatred that had prompted him to take the gringo's life. And he loved Margarita Mayo just as deeply as he had loved her those nights when they had sat, side by side, on the swinging limb of the old live-oak tree.

Five years since the day when he had returned her to her aunt as he might have returned a prisoner to the cuartel. He had not returned nor seen her face since that day.

"A la aurora, a la aurora, levantate, y veras el resplandor . . ."

So he sang, with a poignant bitterness, the song of the lover as he rode a never-ending trail, driven on and on by a restlessness that was like a whip laid across his back.

So he was singing, that soft moonlight night, when he rode up to the camp of the Americans who were on their way to reopen the old Padre mine on the Sangre de Cristo.

SUE GALEN heard the singing and nudged her brother, who dozed with his back to a tree, his cold pipe hanging from his teeth.

"Snap out of it, Smoke. Listen to what's coming."

Smoke Galen's eyes opened. They were bloodshot eyes. He automatically reached for the bottle beside him. She winced a little at the gesture, but pretended not to notice when he drank.

Across the fire Smoke Galen's partner, George Krale, smiled thinly and puffed at his briar pipe. Hartzel, the grizzled, shrewd-eyed geologist with them, did not change expression. But, as the singer came nearer through the moonlit night, all three men had their hands on the butts of their guns.

"Some drunken Mex on his way to a *baile,*" growled Krale, who made little pretense at concealing his dislike for the people of Mexico.

II

A HANDSOME, black-garbed figure, Pablo Costello, as he sat his black horse there at the rim of the firelight. He saluted the girl and her companions with a gesture typical of the true *caballero.*

"What do you want?" growled George Krale.

Pablo's white teeth flashed. "Nothing, señor. I saw the light of your fire and rode this way. It is always well to know who sits beside a campfire, no?"

"Well, you've looked us over," said Krale in a surly tone, "so I take it that your duty is ended. You're at liberty to ride on."

Pablo still smiled, but his black eyes narrowed slightly. Now Sue Galen spoke up.

"Just because you're in camp, George, is no reason that you should lay aside decent manners. Señor, you will pardon the rudeness."

"It is easy to give pardon when you ask it, Señorita Galen."

Sue started. "You know my name?"

"And the name of your companions, *si*. I was in Ensenada when your party set out on the long journey to the old El Padre mine."

"Who told you we were going to the Padre?" asked Smoke Galen, his tone harsh with swift suspicion.

"It is hard to keep secrets, here in Mexico, señor."

"The damned country's full of spies," put in Krale. "Didn't I tell you that, Hartzel?"

"I am sorry, señorita," said Pablo, ignoring the men, "that I have been the cause of such unpleasantness. To avoid further annoyance, I ride on my way. Adios."

PABLO reined his horse, lifting his sombrero. He rode away into the moonlight as he had come, singing as he rode.

He carried with him the vision of a slim, boyish-looking girl in riding breeches and leather jacket. A girl with tanned face and dark red hair, cropped short so that its thick curls gave her a tomboyish appearance. She was the first girl with bobbed hair that Pablo had ever admired. Mostly, he liked women who wore their hair long.

But it was not of the girl alone that he thought. He was tabulating the men, Smoke Galen, the brother, probably a decent enough sort when he was sober. George Krale, with cold gray eyes and a thin-lipped mouth. Hartzel. Hartzel, the pig-eyed mining expert.

Pablo Costello frowned. He wondered just how they had happened to be with Hartzel, whose office was in Ensenada. A good mining man, yes. But an exile from Germany and from the United States. The man was crooked. Likewise he was dangerous. He preyed upon such gullible outsiders as the Galens.

Behind those small, pale blue eyes was a clever, unscrupulous mind that had evolved a dozen and more shady deals that had been to his profit and to the sorrow of his associates. He had been suspected of more than mere swindling.

There was that Englishman who had been found dead of thirst on the desert. Hartzel had been with him on that trip, but Hartzel had survived. He had staggered into San Felipe on the Gulf and told a grim tale of how his companion had died. How he alone had been able to stand up under the grueling trek. But the money that the Englishman was supposed to have carried in a money belt had never been accounted for. And while the water in their canteens might not be enough for two, it was sufficient for one man who knew how to get water from the barrel cactus and mezcalara cactus.

There was that second expedition that Hartzel led across the desert. He, of a party of four, the only survivor. There had been a bullet hole in one of the skulls found later by a desert rat.

Then there was that Portuguese girl who had killed herself down below Rosario. Hartzel had spent a month with her family there. There were some ugly rumors about that affair.

Other sordid tales also connecting Hartzel with the opium and dope ring that passed drugs across the border. He was associated with the running of Chinese through the border around Tecate, until the border patrol had made things too hot for them.

Now Hartzel, the shrewd, the unscrupulous, the cold blooded killer, was piloting that red haired girl and her brother and this man Krale through the wilderness and wasteland marked with the bones of men who had died of thirst and heat, to the old Padre mine. What was his game this time? Money? They didn't look too prosperous.

FROM the shadows ahead where the brush and boulders flanked the trail, there came a slight sound as of brush scraping leather. The ears of Pablo's black horse twitched forward.

"Who goes?" barked a guttural voice in English.

"Pablo Costello, and he goes where he pleases!"

Now the night was ripped with shots. The six-shooter in Pablo's hand bit crimson streaks in the moonlight as he lay low

along the neck of his galloping horse.

"Ay Chihuahua, cuanto Apache de la lenqua Colorada!" The old Chihuahua battle cry broke from his throat in a wild shout. This was the game that Pablo loved. His horse charged the hidden men. Shod hoofs threshed. Groans. Curses. The rattling, choking scream of a man mortally hit.

"Ay Chihuahua, cuanto Apache de la lengua Colorada!"

Like a man backed by an army, Pablo Costello fought. Charging the brush patches. Shooting to kill. Heedless of the leaden hail that droned and whined and snarled past his head.

Now he was on the ground, hidden in the brush. Swiftly, with steady hands, he reloaded the two silver handled guns. Alongside him lay the big black gelding. Trained to perfection, the horse, at the man's signal, had lain down. A cavalry trick that Pablo had spent many hours in schooling the black. Man and horse seemed to understand one another perfectly. They worked with the smooth perfection of a machine.

But the ambushers had apparently gotten their fill. Pablo heard them riding away at a fast gait. He crawled cautiously toward where a man lay writhing in agony. A moment and Pablo's knife was at the fellow's throat.

"Who are you and why are you here, gringo?" he hissed. "The truth or, *por Dios,* I'll cut the tongue from your mouth. You were not waiting for Pablo Costello. Who, then?"

"I ain't squawkin'," gritted the wounded man.

"No? Then, gringo, we shall commence the Apache tortures. First the tongue comes out. . . ."

"Ya devil! I'll talk. Ya cut me tongue, damn yuh!"

"Just the tip," smiled Pablo. He had opened the man's jaws with a pressure of his thumbs that had made the white man's eyeballs fairly pop. "Talk fast, *amigo.*"

"Orders was ta stick up a party the boss was guidin', see? Hold 'em for ransom er somethin'. The boss never gives out much, see. Dat's all I know, so help me."

"The name of your boss?"

"Hartzel. Herman Hartzel. Got a drink on ya?"

"No. So Hartzel is the boss? And the game is ransom? How many of you?"

"Five, till you cut loose. Gus is dead. I'm croakin'. Leaves three. The heels run off wit'out me. The lousy rats! Frisk Gus fer a bottle or some hop, mister. I'm sufferin' like a dog. Dyin', see?"

Pablo found a bottle on the dead Gus. He held the bottle to the lips of the dying man, who swallowed the fiery stuff thirstily. Pablo looked at the fellow's wounds. He was badly hit. Pablo did what he could to make the man comfortable.

"T'anks, buddy. All in da game, ain't it? All just a part . . . part uh da racket. . . ."

The man's head slid sideways. He was dead. Pablo rose and went to his horse. He stroked the velvety black muzzle, a queer look in his dark eyes.

"The hombre said, Chico, that death was just part of the game. Part of what he called the racket. That is so, no, my Chico? For five years now we have looked for death in many places but we have not found it. It has not been our time to die. Now we ride on once more. Looking for death."

III

BACK at the camp, Sue Galen sat staring into the dying fire. She was thinking of that handsome *caballero* who had come into her life and had ridden out of it again. She knew that he was no common man. His poise, his speech, his manners were those of a polished gentleman. The black eyes of the man haunted her thoughts. They were the eyes of a man who has turned many pages of the book of life. Some of the chapters had held love and softness, some bitterness and hot blooded fighting. She wondered who he might be and why he rode alone.

"Thinking of the gay *caballero?*" asked George Krale, a sneer in his voice.

"To be honest with you, I was. Why?"

"You seem to forget that we are engaged to be married."

"Therefore you are sole owner of my thoughts? There are times, George, when you're rather impossible. This is one of those times. Unless you want to watch me take off this perfectly good diamond

and throw it as far as my good old right can toss, you'd better put on a new record. You act like a spoiled brat."

"You know I hate these damn' greasers."

"Perhaps the feeling is mutual. They, however, have the decency to cloak their feelings."

"When I don't like a thing or a person, I'm frank enough to say so. I don't bow and scrape and tip my hat, then run a knife in a man's back."

"No. You growl and snarl. And what does it get you? You don't like Mexicans? How about the little señorita you were so attentive to at the cantina?"

"Who the devil told you! I . . ."

"That you put in the evening at the cantina at Ensenada? You'd be surprised, George."

"Some of Smoke's whisky talk."

Smoke Galen, a short, blocky, square jawed youth who had made a name for himself in the football world, got to his feet. His muscular hands knotted as he stood there, swaying a little.

"You, lie, Krale. Take it back or I'll knock your teeth down your throat. And from now on, treat my sister decently. I was an idiot to go into this deal with you. It's your dough and I'm the work mule. If sis says the word, she and I will go back from here and you can go on with Hartzel. I didn't tell her that we were at that lousy cantina. You know I didn't tell her. Stand on your feet, Krale, and take what you've been needing since we left the States. Stand up, you bum!"

George Krale looked from the girl who sat there smiling, to the husky Smoke who stood on widespread legs, his fists clenched. Krale, though a big man, was afraid of Smoke Galen, who could hit with the force of a mule's kick. Krale fingered his gun, his cold gray eyes narrowing. Herman Hartzel, his heavy face a mask, puffed at a richly colored meerschaum pipe and watched as if he were enjoying it.

SUDDENLY there came the not-too-distant sound of gunfire. All three men tensed. Hartzel's face had a startled expression. In a tense silence they listened, their own quarrel forgotten.

"Better," said Hartzel, "that we put oudt der fire."

Hastily they threw dirt on the fire. Smoke pulled his sister back into the black shadow of the brush. Hartzel and Krale, rifles in their hands, took shelter behind some boulders.

"Sorry, sis," whispered Smoke, "that I've been such a lousy bum. Something tells me that all is not so rosy. I've let you into a mess, kid, but I'll see it through."

"Atta boy, Smoky. Now you're carrying the ball. We've been in tight spots before. We'll play the game out. It may be all hooey but I don't trust this Hartzel party. We should have investigated him before we took him on. Whenever he looks at me I feel like a good-looking animal at a stock show that's being looked over. Now don't get all hot about it, Smoke. I may be all wet. But we'll be on guard. George is showing himself up in a new light, too. He may be all right but he isn't panning any color at present. Listen, the shooting has stopped."

"And here is where you and I fade into the shadows, sis. Somehow I have a hunch that our recent visitor had a hand in that shooting. And while I'm on that subject, sis, I'm sorry I acted like a chump."

"Forget it, Smoke. I savvy. Get set, boy, somebody's coming."

"Got your gun, sis?"

"Yep." Sue Galen's whispered voice was steady. Smoke grinned in the darkness and gripped his sister's shoulder.

"Game gal."

Now a dozen riders suddenly appeared out of the night. A voice, soft, drawling, yet somehow dangerous, broke the silence.

"Hold up, cowhands. Here's the camp. I kin smell the smoke. Step out in the moonlight, pilgrims, an' give us a look at yuh. Don't begin tuh start ary gun ruckus because my boys is on the prod. We ain't hurtin' yuh. We're punchers from the Circle Cross, out skunk huntin'."

Smoke Galen stepped from the shadow of the brush. "I'll speak for the gang, mister. What do you want?"

A lanky, bronzed, quick moving cowpuncher stepped off his horse and walked up to Smoke, his bullhide chaps swishing. There was a six-shooter in the cowboy's hand. Smoke grinned and the cowboy grinned back.

"I'm Bill Edson of the Circle Cross," volunteered the cowboy. "Who are you and what's yore business on our range?"

"Our party is crossing to go to the Padre mine. I'm Jim Galen. With me is my sister, my partner, George Krale, and a mining expert named Herman Hartzel. That's the story."

"Feller," said Bill Edson, and his gun faded, "that ain't even the beginnin' of the story. Hartzel, huh? Step him out."

"Step out, Hartzel," called Smoke Galen. "Friend of yours in camp."

IT was George Krale who appeared. Krale was scowling and it was plain to be seen that he did not enjoy this visit.

"Hartzel quit camp half an hour ago. When that shooting below started he saddled up and went to see what was going on. Hartzel is not here."

"We'll ketch up with him, I reckon," said Bill Edson. "Who was doin' that Fourth uh July stuff below here?"

"Ask us somethin' easier," said Smoke grimly. "That's what I'd like to know." He turned his head and called over his shoulder.

"Come on out, sis. You've been wantin' to look at a real cowboy. Here he is. Mr. Edson, my sister, Sue Galen."

"Proud tuh meet yuh, ma'am." The boss of the Circle Cross pulled off a sweat stained Stetson and looked down at Sue Galen who, rifle in hand, stepped into the moonlight that was almost as bright as day.

"It's good to meet you, Mr. Edson," said Sue. "That shooting had us a little bothered."

"Don't wonder, ma'am. Shootin' is right apt tuh bother 'most anybody. An' so Hartzel pulled out tuh see what was the ruckus, did he? Hmmmm. Well, us boys will be driftin' along. Better bed down in the dark spots, you folks. I'll leave one uh my boys here, just in case. May be back fer breakfast. Say, did Pablo Costello ride thisaway this evenin'?"

"Pablo Costello?" Smoke countered. "Don't know the chap. Unless he is the handsome lookin' guy that rides the slickest black horse I've seen in years. Tall boy with a black mustache and the polite ways of the old dons."

"That's the huckleberry. Was he past here?"

"He was, and how! He rode off singing. Half an hour later the shooting starts."

One of the cowpunchers chuckled. Bill Edson grinned wryly.

"That'll be Pablo. And there'll be some graves tuh fill," said Bill Edson.

"Just who," asked Sue meekly, ignoring George Krale's black scowl, "is this Pablo Costello?"

"Pablo Costello, ma'am," drawled Bill Edson, "is the greatest gringo hater in Mexico. See yuh-all later. So-long."

IV

NO me mates con pistola,
"No me mates con puñal,
"Matame con un besito
"De tu boca de coral. . . ."

Pablo Costello came with the sunrise to the ruins of the Santo Domingo mission. The black gelding was streaked with sweat marks, long since dried so that the black coat of the splendid gelding showed streaks of white. He came with a song on his lips. And his song had the chorus of a hundred birds nesting in the trees there.

Only an old vaquero, used to rising when the night grayed to dawn, was about. To the aged vaquero Pablo gave a gold coin and a few brief orders. Then he took his serape and went into the rough hills to sleep a few hours. At breakfast time he appeared, as clear eyed and fresh as if he had come from a twelve-hour sleep.

The Mexican family there greeted him with a pathetic mixture of awe and friendship. He had some bits of dulce for the children. A few ribbons and trinkets for the women. For the men, a handshake and a few words.

"It has come to my ears, *compadres*," he told them, "that there is now a handsome price upon my head. The news has reached here?"

"*Si, señor.* Two brothers, brothers also we would rather starve, Don Pablo, than to receive one cent of that blood money."

"Well do I know that, my friends, or I would not be with you. Who pays this five thousand pesos for the head of Pablo Costello?"

"A gringo mining company by name of Hutton."

"Hutton?" Pablo's hand passed caress-

ingly across the silver handles of the twin guns he wore. "Hutton. The name of a snake breed."

"*Si, señor.* Two brothers, brothers also of that one you killed five years ago. They are to open the Padre mine, so it is said."

"That," scowled Pablo, "is queer. There is another party of gringos on their way to open the mine of the old Padre diggings. With them rides that hombre Hartzel. Does it not strike you as being very strange, my friends, that, after so many years when the old Padre mine is untouched save by the pick of some wandering old *gambusino* washing placer gold in the creek below, that now two separate parties should be traveling there to find gold?"

"Ay, and that there is, all of a sudden, a price put upon the head of the Señor Pablo Costello?" added a grizzled old Mexican *gambusino,* or placer prospector. There was a shrewd twinkle in the old desert wanderer's dark eyes. Pablo shot him a quick look.

"JUST what do you mean by that, my *amigo?*" he asked quickly.

"It is no secret, señor," replied the old fellow, "that certain papers and maps were given by the last of the padres from that old mission into the keeping of the family of the Costellos. Men say that whenever Pablo Costello has need of gold, he has the map to guide him to the lost mine from where the padres got virgin gold in lumps the size of a man's fist."

Pablo smiled and shrugged his wide shoulders. "Men say many things that are but half true, my friend. True, certain documents were given into my grandfather's hands by the last of the padres who survived the massacre of the Indios. That padre was a Costello, and there at the old Costello rancho far below here.

"It is likewise true that I have hunted for the mother lode of that old mine. The hillside is honeycombed with shafts that have yielded nothing but low-grade ore. Nor have I ever been able to strike anything but low-grade stuff. The main shaft yields nothing. Prospecting there is but a waste of time."

The grizzled *gambusino* cackled into his whiskers. "I have wasted days there and found nothing. But my time was spent, not in the old shafts and tunnels, but in the creek below. It has always been my opinion that the gold of the padres came, not from the hills, but from the creek. Placer gold." And his voice shook a little with that eagerness of the incurable gold hunter.

Again Pablo shrugged and smiled. The old prospector, made bold by the tequilla he had been drinking, wagged a grimy forefinger in front of the young *caballero.*

"The señor does not tell all that he knows about that old Padre mine. He guards well the secret given into his family."

"And why not, old one? Does a man of any value betray a trust?" Pablo's tone was sharp, reprimanding. The old fellow mumbled an apology and shuffled away on his rheumatic legs to attend to his burros.

Pablo quit his seat and strolled outside. Once away from the eyes of the others, his hands clenched into hard knots and there was a terrible look in his narrowed eyes.

"*Madre de Dios,* let me not believe what I am now thinking. That she whom I trusted above all women did betray the trust given her. Hutton, eh? The brothers of that accursed one now traveling toward the old Padre mine. Could it be that she told that dead one and he passed on the secret to his brothers?

"*Valgame Dios,* no! To betray our love, to throw it away as a worthless thing, that was terrible enough. But to pass on to a damned gringo a secret that belonged to the mother church and to the dead who sacrificed their lives in the name of God, that would be damnable. No, no, she would not do so blasphemous a thing. . . . And yet, these gringos are not making that hard journey without some knowledge of what they seek. . . . Even the Señor Dios himself could never forgive such a sin."

LIKE a tiger, Pablo Costello paced the trail that wandered up the canyon. Restless, driven like a tortured, hunted beast, he followed the twisting trail. Not caring where it led, scarcely knowing that he was following a trail at all.

Sweat ran in rivulets down his face from under the heavy sombrero. His hands gripped the two silver handled guns that

had been his father's guns. Pablo, last of the Costellos . . . the last of the line to carry the burden of that hidden secret of the padres who had died for the cross they had carried on sandaled feet, the length and breadth of Mexico. Pablo, last of the Costellos, with a price on his head and a bitterness in his heart.

The trail climbed the side of a rocky hill. A hill pocked with caves and crossed by ledges, so that it looked, for all the world, like a fortress. Winded, Pablo halted. From habit, his eyes swept the little valley below. Suddenly he started.

"Dios!"

Below, coming at a trot up the road used by the wagons and *carretas,* up that old road made centuries ago by the Franciscans who had built the mission of Santo Domingo, there came a group of riders. A dozen men or more. Gringos, by their manner of riding. Pablo crouched behind a rock, watching the men on horseback.

What brought those men to the old mission? What, save the presence here of Pablo Costello? For few, indeed, were those who ever rode up the old road from the sea to the ruins of Santo Domingo, where only a few Mexicans lived on their little farms.

Pablo knew that his friends would not give him away. His horse was well hidden. Perhaps they would return the way they had come.

But no. He saw them dismount and prowl around. An hour, two hours passed. They were unsaddling now, and staking out their horses where the feed was good along the creek. He could see them hunting all around the little ranch. Gringos. Hired, no doubt, by the Huttons to hunt down Pablo Costello and fetch Pablo's head back for the bloody reward.

THE sun climbed higher. Pablo was hot and thirsty but he was barely aware of hunger or heat or thirst. If only he had his Mauser rifle. He could pick them off like blackbirds. But the range was too long for his six-shooters. Would they never leave?

All morning and throughout the afternoon, those gringos prowled about. They combed the valley and canyon above. They wasted ammunition shooting at anything that moved. Pablo waited. Curbing the desire to reveal his hiding place and challenge them to come up after him, he waited. They had not found his horse. That old Mexican had done a splendid job of hiding the big black gelding.

Sundown. Twilight. Purple shadows gathering in the valley now. Cautiously, keeping behind the cover of rocks and brush, Pablo began his dangerous descent. Now he could hear them, gathered in the yard in front of the adobe cabin covered with morning glory vines. They were laughing and talking and singing. One of them was playing a harmonica.

There was a campfire burning, making the yard as light as day. That would be Jose's work. Old Jose, who was wise in the ways of Mexico. A big fire to light up the gringos and make deeper the black shadows that would shelter Pablo Costello. Good old Jose.

That was Jose's mescal in the jug that was being passed from one to another of the tough looking gringos. He was getting them *muy barrachos;* the pigs. There was the odor of barbecued meat and beans and chili. Jose's wife and two daughters were cooking supper for the hogs, the human hogs that were getting drunk.

His common sense told Pablo to slip up the blind canyon to where the black gelding, guarded by a Mexican boy, awaited him, saddled and ready to go. But something about this group of men made him want to wait. Now and then he caught some coarse remark they made. Jose and his women could understand no English, that was well, for Jose, though white of hair and crippled with aches of old wounds, was a man of the wars of Mexico.

A twisted smile showed Pablo's teeth as he crept closer to that group around the fire. The ribald song that one of the gringos was singing was like a cactus sting. For Jose's fat wife and the two comely, fawn eyed daughters were passing tortillas and pots filled with beans and carne.

A SHRILL scream as one of the gringos grabbed the younger girl and pulled her toward him. Now, from out of the black shadows, a thin shaft of bright steel. A knife buried to the hilt in the gringo's shoulder. He gave a howl of pain.

"The first of you damned gringos that

moves," Pablo's voice snapped like the popping of a whiplash, "dies where he sits. I have in each hand a gun with six bullets. If I should miss one shot out of the twelve, then it would be the first time that Pablo Costello ever missed a gringo.

"You come here hunting me, no? Well, hombres, I am here. But I am een the dark while you, my coyotes, are plain to be seen. You will oblige me by standing very erect weeth the han's een the air. Jose weel collect the guns. The first gringo that moves the wrong way weel be soon dead. Stand op, you coyotes! Pronto!"

A few staccato orders to the grim eyed Jose, with a knife in his hand, collecting the guns of the sullen crew who dared do nothing but obey the command of the hidden Pablo. No man of them but knew the deadly aim of the hunted Pablo. The man with the knife in his shoulder lay moaning on the ground. Now Jose picked the blade from his bleeding shoulder and wiped the soiled blade across the wounded man's face.

Pablo whistled shrilly. That was the signal for the Mexican boy to bring his horse.

Pablo, still at a white heat, had forgotten his careful English. In words that were profane enough to carry the message to these toughened man hunters, he taunted them, made fun of them, called them every fighting name he could remember. Sometimes in his own language, sometimes in theirs, he told them what would happen to anyone of them who ever again set foot here at this place.

"You weel saddle up and vamoose, my coyotes. You weel find the guns tomorrow een the ocean at San Quentin. San Quentin, where Pablo Costello has many frien's, onderstan'?. Some of these frien's are Americanos. Not gringo coyotes, but real men. Eef there ees, among you, a man who bears the name of Hutton, I shall be very glad to geeve to heem one of my guns. I weel geeve heem the satisfaction of facing Pablo Costello, who has already keel one Hutton. There ees a man name Hutton here?"

"The only Hutton in this gang," said a bearded man, "is the bird you throwed that knife into."

"So?" Pablo stepped out of the darkness. He stood there in the firelight now, a gun in each hand. Stepping over to the wounded man, he kicked him none too gently in the ribs.

"Stand up, hombre. I weel geeve you one gun. We fight, you and I. One of us dies."

"I'm hurt, damn you! I'm in no shape to call the bet."

"Coyote! Gringo coyote! Eef a man keel my brother, I would keel heem. You are a damn' coward! Take your hombres and go! Vamoose!" Pablo slapped him across the face with his open hand. Rafe Hutton swayed a little, his eyes wide with fear. Pablo laughed in his face.

"We meet again, gringo. Now go before I keel you."

V

ONCE more Pablo Costello rode alone under the stars. Behind him lay Santo Domingo. Ahead, the broken hills against a moonlit sky. He looked at a star up there, and his lips twisted in a bitter smile.

Pablo was thinking of that night, five years and more ago, when he and Margarita Mayo had sat together on the swinging limb of the old live-oak tree.

"Find a star in the sky," he had told her. "That will be our star. And every night, when we are separated, we will both look at that star that belongs to you and to me. And no matter how far the distance is between us, we shall both see that same star and each of us will know that the other also watches. You, in the town. I, camped alone in the hills. That will always be our star."

That was the star that Pablo Costello found tonight in the sky. That was the star that he had watched, so many nights, when love rode with him into the hills of Mexico. The same star that he had watched, night after night, knowing that the woman he loved also watched it. And it had become a symbol of happiness, a dream, a goal.

He had talked to that same star, and had sang songs to it. Love songs. Songs of dreams. Dreams that are food and drink and warmth for the adventurer. Then, in the change of the moon, those dreams had died. Twisted, broken, forever lost to this *caballero* who had loved

and had seen that love thrown away.

Tonight, last night, and on many nights during the past five years, Pablo had watched that star and, watching it, knew that Margarita Mayo, in her garden, was also watching it. Pablo knew that she was always waiting for the tinkle of his spurs as he walked up that old tiled pathway to the *casa* of the Mayos.

He would have given his very life to go back to her. But he could not. Something inside him had died. He felt that he could never again see her face or touch her hand. Nothing beyond a miracle of the Señor Dios could ever take Pablo Costello back to that love that had once been his very life. Why? Perhaps the Señor Dios knew, for Pablo did not. His was a life that could know but one love. When that had withered and died, his heart was also withered.

TONIGHT he would ride to meet whatever fate held for him. The smiling lips of some señorita, perhaps. Or perhaps death. *Quien sabe?* He only knew that he must ride on and on.

He wondered why he kept thinking of that red-haired gringuita. The girl who was with her drunken brother and the man with the cold gray eyes and that rascal Hartzel. With a short, muttered oath, he swung the black gelding off the main trail and took a dim trail that would lead him toward the course that she and her companions would be following. Why? *Quien sabe?*

Still warm on his lips was the farewell kiss of old Jose's youngest daughter. She had clung to him, tears wetting her dark eyes, her red lips whispering love words. And Pablo had shook his head and smiled down at her even as a brother might smile.

"No, my child. To love me will bring you sorrow only. My ways are not your ways. That young goatherder who sometimes comes here loves you. His love is the right kind of love to make you happy. Marry him. Raise your children. Perhaps there will be a baby boy. I would be honored to have him named Pablo. Here is gold for the marriage fiesta.

"And, perhaps, some day when a man or woman will say that Pablo Costello is a despoiler of womanhood, you can say that they lie. *Adios, chiquita.*" And so he had kissed her lightly and had ridden on.

"A la aurora, a la aurora. . . ." Singing the song of the lover. As he thought of the girl with the red hair, his pulse quickened. For that is the way of a *caballero*. He could conjure up the vision of the firelight's glow on that mop of copper colored curls. The tanned, clean-cut face beneath. A frank, honest, brave little face.

But perhaps she could also whisper lies in the moonlight. Women were like that. They would take the very soul of a man and twist it without mercy. Why should Pablo Costello have mercy on any woman? Why not play the love game as they played it? But no. A man must keep that which he calls his honor. Ay, even though he mock himself for upholding a thing that has lost its value. The code of men demanded that a man be honorable.

Pablo tilted his head toward the star-lit sky and sang. Carried away by his musings, he forgot that he rode with a price on his head. Until a voice challenged him.

"Yuh make more noise than a pack uh coyotes, Pablo."

"Bill!" called Pablo, holstering the gun that had slid into his hand. "Bill Edson. *Buenos noches, compadre!*"

BILL EDSON, a carbine in the crook of his arm, stepped from some brush and into the moonlight. Behind Bill Edson's grin was a gravity that Pablo immediately sensed.

"Bin a-trailin' yuh, Pablo. The Huttons are gunnin' for yuh. Got a price on yore head and a lot uh men out to collect the bounty. You better hightail it out of the country for a spell, till things quiet down. Huttons have money and they're bringin' new charges ag'in yuh. Killin' those two burglars last evenin' don't h'ep you none, either.

"The new *jefe* is tryin' to git United States interests into Baja California. Linin' you up ag'in' the wall an' givin' his soldiers some target practice will, so some think, make this country down here safe for the gringo. The papers on both sides uh the border is playin' up this hands-across-the-border. They'll use you tuh make an example, *sabe?*"

"You followed me to tell me this?"

"And to git back some horses that was stolen. Pardner, there's a couple uh tough gangs drifted in here from somewhere. The Huttons fetched in one bunch from Texas. The others, I figger, are connected with this Hartzel gent. They're all headed fer the old Padre mine at the edge of the San Felipe desert. Hell's gonna pop before many moons. You better drift outa the country, old pardner."

"Run from the Huttons? Be chased out of my own country by a pack of gringo coyotes? You know Pablo Costello better than that, *amigo*."

"Just what I was afraid of," growled Bill Edson. "Hell, man, you can't lick all Mexico single handed. They'll have the Rurales after yuh in a few days."

"It would not be the first time they have chased me, Señor Bill, and it will not be the first time that I have made fools of them."

"Yuh prideful darned fool. Some day yore luck will change and I'll have tuh whittle yore name on a headboard. I can't be much he'p to yuh now, Pablo. The owners uh the Circle Cross are due 'most any day now. They're dickerin' for a sale uh the outfit to some Texas cowmen. I gotta stay on the job. But if I git word yuh need me, I'll whip my pony down the hind laig and lend a hand. Where are yuh goin' now?"

"I go to sing a little song or two to a little lady with very nice red hair."

"I mighta knowed it. Wish I could warble them *paisano* love songs. All I kin do to'rds attractin' the ladies is wiggle my ears an' look cross-eyed. But yuh can't hold 'em long thataway. And afore the evenin' is over my ears is plumb tired an' my eyes don't work so good.

"Now if I was a good-lookin' thing like you, an' could warble me them Mexican love songs, I'd beat yore time with that there li'l' red-haired gal. She's purtier'n a red apple and game to boot. Whatever she's thinkin' about when she comes messin' aroun' down here, I don't savvy. And if I wa'n't so tied up with the owners comin' down, I'd make it my job tuh ride herd on that young lady. I shore would. She's into a tight, pardner. You might lend a hand there. Tell her what kind of a snake this Hartzel is. Send her home."

"You like this lady, Bill? *'Sta bueno.* I shall inform her how you wiggle the ears and make cockeyes. I will play the Señor John Alden and you are the Capitan Standish."

"Whatever that means."

"Precisely, *mi compadre*. Whatever that means. Now I ride on. Those Circle Cross horses which you are hunting for, you will find between Santa Domingo and San Quentin. Have no fear of riding up to the men, because they have no guns. *Adios, compadre,* until again our trails cross."

VI

AN hour or so later Pablo Costello approached the camp where Sue Galen, her brother and George Krale sat. There was no sign of Hartzel. Plainly, Krale was in an ugly humor. Sometimes he would get to his feet and walk away from the fire. Always he kept his hand close to his gun and he kept searching the shadows with his cold gray eyes.

"What's keeping Hartzel?" he growled, again and again. "What's gone wrong, anyhow?"

"He was scared green of those cowboys, for one thing. When they showed up last night, Hartzel took a powder on us," said Smoke Galen. "He's held us up a whole day waiting for him to come back from his rabbit act. There's somethin' lousy about that bird, if you ask me."

"I wasn't asking you," snapped Krale.

"Then consider this information being volunteered on my part, George," grinned Smoke. "Gosh, you're getting to be pleasant company. Sis, get out that old ukulele and we'll tune in on some close harmony. Anything to take the curse off this family grouch. George can contribute to the entertainment by applauding at the proper moments. I'll tell you when to clap hands, Georgie. And when to hiss. All set, sis? Gimme A. How about something new and snappy like Sweet Adeline? Let's go!"

Krale, with a muttered oath, strode off into the night. Smoke grinned at his sister, who winked back at him as she softly strummed the little ukelele with expert touch. From its strings she coaxed plaintive chords. Her voice, throaty, soft, sang some song in native Hawaiian. Smoke hummed a deep baritone.

"Anyhow, sis, our music hath a purpose. Brother Krale takes the ozone. Game kid. Game little Sue. You deserve better breaks than this old world has given you."

"What's wrong with this night, Smoky? There's a swell-elegant moon and a million stars. A campfire. And perhaps the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. It beats the old racket, Smoke, old warrior, even if we come back broke and ragged. At least I've had my dreamy eyes opened.

"George is one grand washout. By the way, I slipped his ice back to him. I'm a free woman. Free, white and twenty-one. It's worth the trip to know what an absolute bum that gent is. Now let's get this Mexican song I learned from that pitiful little gal at Ensenada. It goes like this:

"A la aurora, a la aurora, levantate. . . ."

SUE sang, her eyes gazing at the star-lit sky. She finished the song. A silence held the pair. Neither of them noticed Pablo standing beyond the rim of the firelight until he struck a match to light his cigarette. He smiled at them and swept off his sombrero.

"Again I intrude. If I make my presence unwelcome, tell me and I will ride on with the memory of the song I have heard."

Smoke got to his feet, his blunt hand held out. "Glad to have you back, old man. And I owe you an apology. Last time you were here I was half stiff. I'm darned sorry."

"There is nothing to be sorry for, señor. I have been, sometimes, what you call half stiff."

"Take care of your horse and join us," said Smoke, when their hands gripped.

"The horse," said Pablo, "is already taken care of. I assumed that liberty."

"Had supper?" asked Smoke.

"Many thanks, I have eaten."

"A man told us," said Sue, "that you hated all gringos. I don't like to seem rude, but if it's a fair question, why do you come to the camp of us gringos?" There was a challenge in her eyes that Pablo met with a quick smile.

"Gringo is a word that one uses either in hatred or with that feeling of friendship. Like the word that was used in your American classic, The Virginian. To say to you, with a smile, and with a handshake, 'gringo,' that is one thing. To say across the sights of a gun that same 'gringo,' that, you must understand, is quite another matter. Perhaps I make myself plain to you?"

"Smile when you say it," nodded Smoke. "I get you. You're Pablo Costello. I've heard of a Pablo Costello who went to West Point."

Pablo's heels clicked. He snapped his right arm in a perfect figure four salute. Then he laughed. Softly, with that pinch of poignant bitterness.

"Yes. West Point. By special appointment from the President of Mexico. Four of the happiest years I have ever known. It is a memory that I have kept." Pablo remained standing.

IT was Sue Galen who asked Pablo to join them and he accepted with that graceful gesture that only one of his blood and breeding can make without being theatric.

He sat back beyond the glow of the firelight, with his back against a rock. There was a long minute of silence that was becoming a trifle awkward. Pablo broke the tension with his next words.

"The Señores Krale and Hartzel have deserted you?"

Smoke gave Pablo a quick look. "Hartzel left last night. Hasn't come back. George don't care for music and took a walk."

"We are alone, then, we three?"

"Unless George is sulking in the shadows," said Smoke, his eyes hardening.

"There is something I wish to say that must not be overheard," said Pablo. "It is something that might mean life or death to you both."

"Let 'er buck," said Smoke, a little grimly.

"The rocks have ears," said Pablo, "and also the bushes have ears. It is always well to look around a little before . . ."

With a whirling leap, Pablo was gone from his seat at the base of the big rock. Vaulting the rock, he had gone into the black shadows beyond. There sounded the crack of a pistol shot. A short, quick laugh. A choking, gasping sound.

The next minute Pablo Costello was back in the rim of the firelight with George Krale. Pablo had a hammer-lock on

Krale. There was a widening trickle of blood on Pablo's cheek, but his teeth flashed in a quick smile. Krale winced under the pressure of Pablo's hands.

"It is always well," said Pablo, "to look into the shadows for snakes before a man spreads his blankets. Only because there is a lady present, Señor Krale, I cannot do with you as I would like. Sit down, gringo."

With a swift, strong muscled twist, Pablo sent Krale spinning like a top, to land in a heap at the edge of the fire. Now Pablo stood there, teeth bared, every muscle tense, like a tiger ready to spring.

"Tell them, hombre, tell them why you hate the Mexican people!"

"Costello," gritted Krale, "you'll pay for this! I'll live to see you shot against the wall, you murdering greaser. I'll tell 'em why I hate the Mexicans. I'll tell 'em why I hate you above all other Mexicans. But I'll not tell 'em here or now.

"Murder me if you want. Shoot me down like you've shot other men. But, so help me God, you'll pay for the murder. I knew you'd come back, you murderer. You knew me. You spotted me from the start because the man you murdered five years ago was my cousin. Why don't you shoot, greaser? Why don't you kill me like you killed him? Go ahead . . . Pull the trigger!"

PABLO tossed Krale a .45. It was the gun he had taken, only a few moments ago, from the American.

"It would please me much, señor, to meet you in a duel. There is your gun. Mine, as you notice, is back in the holster. I give you odds, gringo, and will pay any bet you wish to make to the Señor Smoke Galen that I will put six bullets into you. I have killed men, yes. But each man that found death by my gun had his chance. Fight, gringo!"

But the man who called himself George Krale had no stomach for such a duel. Pablo pressed a handkerchief to the bullet wound across his cheek. Krale's hand never reached for the black-handled Colt gun.

"I was saying to the Señorita Galen and her brother," continued Pablo Costello, "that there was something I wished to say to them without being overheard. However, I will say what I wish to say in your presence. For them it is very dangerous to travel on to the old Padre mine. For you, hombre, it is more than dangerous. It is death. It is likewise death for Herman Hartzel.

"Because the Padre mine belongs to no man but a Costello. What gold is there is mine. It is mine by the laws of heritage. From the mine I take nothing. There is nothing there, understand, to take. Many years ago the mine was worked clean. There is no gold there. Every prospector in Mexico knows that. Either you are being taken on the wild goose chase by Herman Hartzel . . . Or you travel there for another purpose. Which?"

"We'd be foolish to tip our hands to any man," said Smoke Galen.

"Ay, señor. And you will be worse than fools if you do not tell the truth to Pablo Costello tonight."

"That sounds like a threat," said Sue Galen.

"Perhaps it is," admitted Pablo. "On the other hand, perhaps it is but a friendly warning. In my saddle pocket is more gold than you will ever find at the lost Padre mine. I offer it freely to you, señorita, and to your brother, if you will turn back from this spot. I will give you an armed escort back to Ensenada. You are welcome to what gold I have with me."

"JUST why do you offer us this?" asked Smoke Galen.

"Because I do not wish to see what must happen if you continue this *pasear*. Tomorrow night you camp, perhaps, on the little river we call the Sangre de Cristo.

"From that spot, to the little port of San Felipe, there is a trail. It has no tracks, that trail. But it is marked by the bones of mules and horses and the bones of men. Those of us who have passed over that trail have given it a name. The name of that trail is the Rastro de Sangre. The Trail of Blood.

"Of your party, but one man has made tracks on the Rastro de Sangre. That man is Herman Hartzel. He has crossed that trail several times. No man who ever went along that trail with Hartzel ever returned alive. To travel it now means death. It is no idle threat, but only the warning given you by a friend."

"Friend?" snarled Krale. "Costello, you're running a bluff. You know there's gold there. You're throwin' a scare into us because you want that gold. Smoke, don't let this greaser scare you."

"Why don't you spill your chatter to Costello, George?" asked Smoke Galen. "I heard what you said and what he said. He has a good line and he's sold me on it. Somehow, George, Pablo Costello don't look to me like a man that lies. Get what I mean?"

"You mean you're dropping me, a white man, a fraternity brother, a man you've known for years, on the word of a renegade greaser with a price on his head?"

"It amounts to just about that, George. I'll string my bets with Pablo Costello, win, lose or draw. If he's a liar, then I'm a Swiss yodeler. He gives you a fair chance to do your stuff and you crawl backward. He gives you the breaks and you ain't game enough to call. Either shoot, Luke, or give dad the gun. See what I mean?"

"How about our contract, Galen?" Krale's hand crept toward the gun that lay near him.

"It's out. Sis and I put our last dime into this venture. Take it, Georgie, and buy yourself some lilies of the valley. I like this Costello boy and I'm with him and for him. Krale, you've had a lot of bids in for a sweet whippin'. I'm the baby that's about to give it to you. Pablo, referee the bout. Krale, you louse, make your own rules. I'm comin' after you!"

VII

PABLO kicked Krale's gun out of reach. Smoke Galen shed his leather jumper. He grinned sideways at his sister. "All right by you, Susan?"

"All right by me, Smoky, old boy. Take him."

Smoke Galen "took" George Krale. Again and again he knocked him down and let the man get on his feet again. Hitting with the timed punch of a boxer, Smoke sent snarling, cursing Krale to the ground. Sue Galen tried to make her brother stop, but Smoke was stubbornly grinning and shaking his head.

"Just painting a little picture, sis—a picture in yellow . . . Here goes all we got. Our last dime. But I just have to polish off this guy. Duty bound, sis. . . . This left taps the good old claret. . . . You'll look sweet with a busted nose, George. And now take this one, you heel!" He swung a short swing into Krale's belly and Krale went down, groaning.

Smoke blew gently on his bruised knuckles and grinned crookedly at Pablo.

"There," said Smoke, "goes our grubstake. Ten thousand smackers burned up. But it was worth it. Costello, is there any kind of a job here in Mexico that I can hold down till we get money for the groceries again?"

Pablo rolled a cigaret. "There is in my saddle pockets five thousand dollars in gold. It is yours. Take your sister and go home. Pay me back when you become rich. It is my payment for what you call the ringside seat."

Smoke grinned and shook his head. "We'll send sis home. Then, Costello, I'll just play around with you. I've got a lot of faults that you'll cuss me for. But you've done us a favor and I'll do my best to play the game. From the start, I've smelled something bad about Krale and Hartzel. I went to college with Krale. Thought I knew him. Took him to our home and he got his stuff across in a slick way. But for several days I felt he was pulling a fast one. Sis felt the same. We can get her back home, then I'll play your game. I think, Costello, that I know what it is."

"Perhaps," Pablo shrugged his wide shoulders. "Perhaps not."

"But I think we do . . . now." Sue Galen took a blueprint map from her jacket pocket. Without a word, she handed it to Pablo. He scanned it briefly and smiled, though his eyes were hard and bitter.

"I return to you the map. It is, as you know, the map of a certain spot where there is gold. Not gold that comes from the ground, but gold that has been made into chalice cups and images of the saints. Enough gold there to make a hundred men wealthy. Yes, that is the map. But may the Señor Dios have mercy on the man who finds it. For I will be guarding that spot and each bullet that leaves my guns will take the life of a man!"

"Hartzel and Krale claimed it was the location of the old mine," said Smoke.

"They lied."

PABLO cocked his gun. Walking over to where Krale lay gasping and moaning, he pointed the gun at the man's head.

"To kill the snake is a blessing to humanity. Is there, perhaps, some reason why I should let you live?"

Krale looked at Pablo with stricken eye. "I . . . Don't murder me! Don't kill me here! I don't want to die! I'll do whatever you say, Costello! So help me God, I'll lay my cards on the table!"

"You mean," said Pablo, measuring his words, "that you will be a traitor to your cousins? That you will tell to Pablo Costello that which you know about this map? That you will tell me how it came into your hands?"

"I'll tell everything! How the map was given to my cousin Bob Hutton by . . ."

The gun in Pablo's hand spat fire. There was a widening crimson streak across the forehead of George Krale.

Pablo Costello spun the cylinder of his silver handled gun. He looked across the firelight at the tense faces of Sue Galen and her brother. Now he smiled twistedly as he ejected the empty shell and shoved a fresh cartridge into the chamber.

"Lord!" Smoke's voice was a husky whisper. "That's murder!"

"I . . . I've never seen a thing so horribly brutal," said Sue Galen. "It was . . . just . . . murder!"

"And what," smiled Pablo, "do you know of murder? *Dios*, I, I, Pablo Costello, know what it is to be murdered. And you? No! What do you know of murder? To take the heart of a man from his body and soil it in the dirt, that, my friends, is murder. To kill that man is nothing. There is nothing inside him to kill except the bone and the muscle and the fat and the blood. Murder?" Pablo looked at the silver handled gun in his hand.

"This is a very good gon. My father gave it to me. There are two gons that are equally balanced. They shoot well, these gons. Only because Pablo Costello knows these gons as a mother knows her children, can I shoot them. Out of five brothers, my father chose me to handle these gons. These gons that are tweens." Pablo shoved the gun into its holster and lit a cigaret.

"In perhaps one hour the Señor Krale will awaken. Like I told you, these are good gons. The bullet that makes all that blood cut only the scalp of the gringo. He will be awake soon. Perhaps now, we may speak without being overheard." Pablo picked a glowing twig from the fire and lighted his husk cigaret.

"Watch out for Hartzel," Smoke warned him. "He's due back here 'most any time."

Pablo shrugged. "Always, my friend, I watch for men like Hartzel. Otherwise I should not be standing here alive. Here in Mexico, where enemies are many, we learn to be always on guard. When the day or the night comes that I do not watch very careful, that day or night will be my last on this earth."

PABLO returned the blueprint map to Sue with a bow.

"A very good map, Señorita. Would you mind my knowing how such a map came into your possession?"

"George had the original map," said Smoke. "From it we made the blueprints. There was quite a legend about the real map. How it had been made by the old padres of the mission that was destroyed by the Indians, and given to the last survivor of the massacre to carry to safety. This last of the padres made his escape and later died of wounds.

"The map was given to a Mexican family that sheltered the last padre. It remained in this family for generations. When they needed gold, they came by night to the mine and dug up the gold. And when the revolutions wiped out all this family except one, that one passed on the secret to his sweetheart who, in turn, gave it to George Krale's cousin. She must have . . ."

"Smoke!" cried his sister, her face white now, "You nitwit, pipe down! Where is your common sense. Don't you remember the name of the Mexican family that had the map?"

"Great gosh, yes! Costello! Pablo, old chap, try to forget what I was popping off about. Sis, take a swift kick at me. I'm the prize mutt. Gosh, Pablo, I'm sorry I spoke out of turn."

"It is nothing, señor. The harm is done. Señorita, could I look once more at that blueprint map?"

It was an awkward silence that held them as Pablo's dark eyes scanned the map.

"You have made me very happy," he said, smiling.

"Happy?" Sue shook her head.

"But yes. The map, onderstand, is perfect except for one detail. It is a well constructed map. But it gives the wrong location of the buried treasure. The map, therefore, is worthless."

"And the trust you gave into the keeping of Margarita Mayo has not been violated, then?" smiled Sue.

"*Madre de Dios,* forgive me. The trust has not been betrayed. You have been badly cheated, but I am more than willing to pay you all you have lost. It is worth much to know that—that a secret has been kept."

Smoke shot a swift look at his sister, who nodded ever so slightly.

NOW Pablo slid back into the shadows, his guns ready. There sounded the thud of shod hoofs rapidly approaching. Krale stirred and opened his eyes. A few moments later a squad of Rurales rode into the rim of the firelight. They barked out quick questions to which neither Smoke nor his sister gave reply.

"No savvy," said Smoke.

"No savvy," smiled Sue. "Want supper? Carne? Frijoles?"

"You savvy, both of you," gritted Krale, "and dang well I know it. Those Rurales are askin' about Pablo Costello. Where did he go after he tried to murder me? Cripes, my head aches! Where'd that greaser go? Damn you, Smoke, where'd he go?"

"No spika da Engleesh," grinned Smoke. "Me talkee alle same Japanese. You no savvy Japanese? Yokohama, Tokyo, Kyusho, Shikoku, Kangawa, rice and saki. Alee same Merican. Hari kari, kimona. No spika da Engleesh. And now, ladies and gents, we have here on this little table three little walnut shells. Under one of these shells you will find the elusive little pea. Step up, folks, and try your luck. . . .

"And Georgie, my lad, if you open the old trap or make a play for that gun, you'll get a nice bellyful of lead. Susan, old pal, take a little shelter for your own sweet self. Because if this Krale proposition starts to get funny, I'm takin' him on, and how. And if these southbound cops get into the game, I prefer dandelions to lilies. Like I said before, no spika da Engleesh. George, sit down comfortably and blow your nose.

"Now, gentlemen, what, if anything, can I do to make it a bigger and better evening for you? Sound off, my men! What's the name of your special hunger? I'll serve you anything from forty-five slugs to .7 MM Mauser bullets wrapped up in steel jackets. Name your own route. And George, old classmate, be docile or, so help me Hanna, I'll push holes in yuh."

"A fine pal you are," snarled Krale.

"Quite so, Georgie. How do you like it out West, as far as you've been? Polly want a cracker? Wipe off your chin, corporal, you're drooling again. Listen, heel. You pop off and we put you where you'll push up the desert flowers, get me? This is my own particular show and I'll run it. Somewhere in the shadows a friend of mine who is a quick triggered gent is getting an earful. And he'd be glad indeed to open up the grand and glorious fourth. So behave, small change. Tuck in your bib and sit down. Papa spank, see? . . . As you were, louse!"

IN Smoke Galen's hand was a .45 automatic.

"Take it, George, and like it, you bum! Don't open that trap or I'll choke ya with a bullet. You're a louse. Hartzel is a skunk. You make good companions. No spika da Engleesh, see, but I'm tellin' these boys a few words in a few seconds. They're after a buddy of mine. I ain't known him long but it was long enough to know he's regular. When they take that guy, they take me with him.

"Georgie, if you move that mitt of yours any nearer your gat, I'll get ya. This is Smoke Galen soundin' off over Station C O L T."

"We are hont," said the Rurale captain, "por Pablo Costello."

"Yeah?" Smoke's jaw jutted out a trifle further. "Then let me tell you this, mister. Pablo Costello is a real guy and he's my buddy. And I'd sure hate to tell you and your men what I think of a pack of Mexicans that will hunt down a man for a few lousy gringo dollars. Get that? Pablo is a man. Dang well you know it, too. Now keep movin' or the fireworks starts. In the brush is the man you are huntin'. But unless you are cravin' some tough luck, don't go in and look for him. Gen-

tlemen, I bid you good night. Vamoose!"

There was an odd twinkle in the eyes of the Rurale captain as he ordered his men to ride on. He reached from his saddle to grip hands with Smoke.

"Señor, you are a real man and a real friend to that countryman of mine, Pablo Costello. I hunt him because the law tells me that I must hunt por heem, not por those pesos offered by the gringos. Many years Pablo and I have known each other. Ees good theeng to meet an Americano who onderstan's the heart of the Mexican. When again you see that Pablo, tell heem that hees ol' frien' Tomas Tapia rode past. The orders are to proceed to the port of San Quentin."

"You know," gritted George Krale, "that Pablo Costello is headed for the San Felipe desert. Why do you go to San Quentin then?"

"Because," came the suave reply, "the orders read like that. *Señors, adios!*"

With his men, the Rurale captain rode away.

VIII

SMOKE grinned crookedly at Krale.

"This is where you and I split the blankets, George."

"Yeah?"

"Just that. Yeah. You and Hartzel go your trail, Sis, and I go ours. Is that plain enough, egg?"

"So you're turning back, eh, Smoke? Quitting me after I've sunk a lot of time and money in this business? Where do you get like that? You'll play out the game, kid. I put up with you when you're soused and goofy and needed a friend. I put my trust in you and Sue and give you a great break. Then a Mexican Romeo comes along and you think I'm a heel. He's salved you both and you think he's one great guy. And one of these nights you'll be waking up with a knife in your back and what'll happen to Sue?

"You're smart, Smoke—just like a goat. Yeah, you're bright. That Mex tried to murder me after you had worked me over. That's how brave he is. Smoke, you've got to go on with me, and so does Sue. Hartzel has everything ready. He's been workin' on this for months. We're all set to make a fortune and you act like a fool. Great gosh, man, you wouldn't want your own sister married to a bird like this Costello guy?"

"She could do a lot worse, George. I think you heard me the first time. Sue and I are quitting you and Hartzel. What dough we've put into the venture, we'll take a losin'. Speaking of Hartzel, if he's so good, why does he sneak off when these Circle Cross cowboys ride up?"

"That's probably some more of Hartzel's own business. By the same token, no business of yours, if you follow me."

"I follow you, George, plenty. Fact is, I'm ahead of you a few jumps. I'll give you fifteen minutes to clear out of this camp. If you're still here at the end of that time, I'll take you to what is known as a real cleanin'. Get busy."

Krale muttered under his breath and began packing. Now, from out of the darkness, there stepped Hartzel. The man looked haggard and ugly tempered as he strode over to Krale and Smoke.

"I overhear some vords," he growled. "Vat is all dis about quitting?"

"Krale and you go on together, Hartzel," said Smoke.

"Yah? *Dumheit! Verdamter domkopf!* Krale and I, yah? T'ink vunce more, dunce. You und der sister come. Else somebody gets hurt. Hidden behind me in der dark iss men mit guns ready to shoot. Herr Galen, you und *die fraulein* come along mit Herman Hartzel und George Krale. Mitout no more arguments, see?"

"Tell Sue to get back here," growled Krale.

"Sue," said that little lady coldly, "needs no interpreter. She speaks for herself."

"Where's Pablo Costello?" asked Smoke.

"Gone. He faded into the shadows and took a powder on us, Smoky."

"Honest, sis? He pulled out?"

"And left us in a tight spot, if you ask me," said Sue Galen. "Look at the two comrades of the trail, Smoky, with their guns all cocked and ready to blow you into an early grave. Go easy. George and the eminent geologist would love to plug you."

"Splendid companions," said Smoke. "Great pals. Meanin' that Hartzel and George Krale are two of the lowest, lousiest bums I ever met. And whenever they start in on me, somebody besides Smoke

Galen gets hurt. Understand that talk, you two tramps."

"Perfectly," smiled Krale, his eyes narrowing. "But before you get hostile, look behind you."

TWO men with leveled rifles stood behind Smoke Galen. He tensed, as if about to spring. Sue's voice warned him.

"Easy, Smoke, old boy. Better take it as she lays. Just at the moment, we're licked. But there is always tomorrow. George, you and your buddy seem to have all the aces in the deck. Name your terms."

"The terms," said Hartzel, carefully wording his speech, "is mine. Krale, from here on, Herman Hartzel iss der main vun. Dis iss mine party from here forvard. Der terms iss like diss. At San Felipe ve find gold. Und Herman Hartzel takes a bride. *Ja!*

"Make vun move und you two men die. You vill not be der first to die mit a bullet in der belly. Und ven der carcasses get found oudt, you have died from lack uv vater. A bullet in der belly makes no mark on der bones. Und der buzzards und coyotes leave nothing but der bones. From you, Herr Krale, I take der map. Und from you, Herr Galen, I take der sister in marriage, *ja?*"

"I'll see you in hell first!" gritted Smoke.

"That," came a purring voice from the darkness, "will not be so greatly necessary. Hartzel, you and Señor Krale will be so accommodating as to move along. Take along with you these gunmen who. . . . *Ay, Chihuahua!*" Pablo was spilling bullets from his two guns. Hartzel's men had opened up on him and now the darkness was filled with flashes of gunfire.

Smoke Galen had jerked his gun as a heavy lead slug ripped through his hat. Smoke, crouched in the shadow. Sue behind him, lying prone as the bullets whipped past. Pablo shooting and laughing and shouting his war cry from the old rebel days when he had been a captain and had fought his way from Juarez to Mexico City and back to Nogales. . . .

"Ay, Chihuahua, cuanto Apache de la lengua colorada!"

Wild, barbaric, with the fire and the grit and the blood and the nerve to die laughing. *"Ay, Chihuahua!"* And his guns cracked like exploding firecrackers. Smoke, a little bewildered, still loath to fire at men whose campfires and blankets he had shared, was popping at Hartzel's gunmen.

Now there sounded the thud of hoofbeats. Growled orders. Packs hastily jerked tight across the backs of mules. The stutter of a machine gun.

"Und take a belly full of dat!" snarled Hartzel, handling the Lewis gun. It sprayed the brush and boulders. Now, from out of the night, a wild cowboy yell. Hartzel snapped quick orders. Smoke, a bullet hole in his leg, was reloading his gun.

"Steady, sis. Sounds like that Circle Cross boss. Lay low, kid. Take it easy."

"Ay Chihuahua!" yelled Pablo. "Come an' take eet, gringos! You theenk you take Pablo Costello? Try once again sometime! *Ay, Chihuahua, cuanto Apache de le lengua colorada!"*

"Powder River!" yelped Smoke. "A mile wide and a foot deep!"

Pablo's reckless laugh. Smoke's throaty challenge flung through set teeth. Now the place was filled with riders. The pounding of shod hoofs as Hartzel and Krale and their men made hasty flight.

THE flare of a match. Pablo's white teeth as he cupped the flame in his hands and lit his cigarette.

"I knew darned well," sounded Bill Edson's soft drawl, "that you'd git me into a tight. Pablo, won't you never learn sense?"

Pablo's face smiled. He twisted out the flame of the match. "Again we meet, Señor Beel!"

"Yeah. Where's the lady?"

"Safe," called Sue. "And scared to a crisp."

"I knowed when that wild son started," Bill Edson said as he rolled and lit a cigarette, "that his singin' would have a chorus uh bullet sounds. Ma'am, this gosh blamed pardner uh mine, Pablo, will git yuh into more jackpots than an army kin take yuh out of. Well, there goes my job. I'm a blowed up sucker, Pablo."

"No. Por why?"

"Por why, yuh bonehead? This Krale is a cousin uh the Hutton tribe and the Huttons just bought the Circle Cross."

"I am sorry, *compadre*. The Huttons buy the Circle Cross? You exchange shots

with Krale? Therefore, you are fired, no?"

"Fired, hell! I done quit when the news got to me. I'm kinda choicey about who I draw pay from, feller. Five—six boys that feels the same way is with me. We done quit about two hours ago. What's yore trail, Pablo?"

"Across the San Felipe desert to the gulf. Why?"

"Want company?"

"What do you mean, Beel?"

"Meanin' that when we bust with the Huttons we ain't so popular in these parts. San Felipe sounds *bueno* for us."

"That goes for me," said Smoke Galen. "How's chances for the makin's of a smoke?"

"I could use a puff or so," added Sue Galen. "Let's get that leg of yours fixed, Smoky."

Bill Edson grinned at Pablo.

"One Mexican. A scatterment of gringos. One lady," said Bill Edson. "Bound fer San Felipe. None of us kin turn back. Sounds like plenty trouble."

"And some fon, Beel," laughed Pablo.

"Yeah. Fun. Fun fer the buzzards, most likely, but we can't buy 'em down here. We all gotta proceed yonderly. Ma'am, kin yuh put up with this ornery gang?"

"If you try to send me back," said Sue, "I'll turn worse than ornery!"

IX

SAND . . . sand into which man and beast sank ankle deep with each step. Sand that held no shade save the thin shadow of the cactus. Overhead a brassy, blazing ball of sun that beat down with a merciless, eternal glare. Gray lizards panted in the shade of the cactus plants.

Save for the horses and men and the one woman who kept doggedly on across that never ending strip of sun blistered sand, nothing save those lizards seemed alive. Thirst gripped the throats of those men and that one woman. The sun's glare reddened their eyes. Few words passed. There was the shuffle of shod hoofs, the creak of saddle leather, the tinkle of spur rowels. Now and then some man spoke, but not often. The water supply kept getting lower.

Pablo Costello smiled, his sun-cracked lips parting from teeth as white as the salt beds they had passed that day.

"I will show you now," he told Sue, "how it was that I was able, some years ago, to cross this desert without water." He took his hunting knife and hacked off the long, thick stem of a mescalera cactus. Peeling this stem, which was perhaps four inches thick and two feet long, he handed it to Sue.

"Chew it, señorita. You will find the taste pleasant and there is enough moisture there to save a man's life. It is, you onderstand, both the food and the drink. The wild burros we sometimes see live on those stems.

"And that round cactus there, what you call the barrel cactus, it also contains water. Take a knife and cut off the top. Inside, by pressing down, you get water. That is how I lived when I crossed. That is how Herman Hartzel lived when he crossed over the mountains and across this desert to the port of San Felipe. That is the secret he never shared with those he took on the trail. That is how he lived when they died. He could have saved them. The horses will live on this and we will all live on it, my friends, before we reach water at San Felipe."

Bill Edson nodded. "Pablo's right. Go easy on the water, boys. What there is, we'll save careful. How much fu'ther to San Felipe, Pablo?"

"Two more days. There is no water between here and there. By the trail that Hartzel and Krale and the Hutton outfit travels, there are two places where one finds water. But we are making the short cut. It is very necessary, onderstand, that we reach San Felipe before they. Then we load up with water and turn back. Back to where there is more gold than these mules and horses can carry.

"I take you to the mine of the old padres. The lost Padre mine. There is gold enough to make every man here rich. In return for that gold, I will ask of you a favor. Take the treasures I give into your care and deliver them to a place I will name later. And when I am killed, see that I am buried there. And now, my friends, I leave you for a few hours. Tonight, tomorrow, perhaps, I again join you. Bill, you have the directions. Keep to the straight course. Save the water and use

the cactus. If I do not see you by tomorrow night at dark, you will know that Pablo Costello is dead."

"What's the idea, old man?" asked Smoke. "We're all buddies on this deal. If you're goin' into a hot spot, let the rest of us share the danger with you."

"It is, my friend, a matter of honor. Something that I can share with no man. Beyond that, I cannot explain."

"Pablo's right," said Bill Edson. "He's given me the only true map in existence, except one other. What he has to do, he's gotta be alone to do it. Me and Pablo has done argued that out a lot uh times. He wouldn't let any man go with him. That's his way and there's no talkin' him out of it. I'll ramrod the spread till Pablo ketches up again."

"*Gracias*, Beel." Pablo gripped Bill Edson's hand. "To you, señorita, I say *adios*. To Smoke and Beel and the other men, I wish you all good luck. Now I take my departure from you to do that which only a Costello can do. *Adios!*"

WHEN Pablo had ridden away, to be lost in the heat waves that blurred their vision, Sue dropped back to ride alongside Bill Edson. Bill grinned and passed over his canteen, but Sue shook her head.

"I'll take no more than my share," she told him. "I'm able to stand the tough raps or I wouldn't have started. Ask Smoke and he'll tell you I've been on a few tough journeys. This cactus will do me, Bill."

"Yes, ma'am. I never was on a pasear like this with a lady along. But yo're plumb game. And I bet that when yo're home, yuh have silk lined skillets an' plush tuh set on an' yore main grub is fricasseed canary birds' eyebrows."

"That's where you're all wrong," smiled Sue. "I'm just a vaudeville sprout that's made her own groceries since she could remember how to do tap dancing and singing. Smoke and I have been on our own for a lot of years. When he gets something like this Padre mine business, I trail along and let the theatrical world go on the rocks.

"I like this kind of a racket. Get sick of eating trick dinners with trick dudes that think because a gal is making her living on the stage it's open season. I've rode mules across the Andes. I've run the white water rapids in a canoe. And I ran a trap line up in the Peace River country. It's raised hell with my complexion but it's my life. I'll take butts on that smoke, Bill."

Bill Edson was as red as a sunset. He gave Sue a sidelong glance and found her laughing silently. Then he handed her his papers and tobacco. Sue wrapped up a cigarette, lit it, then passed it over to him. He threw away the stub of a cigarette he had been holding for an hour, and took the one Sue had given him.

"That kinda makes us pardners, ma'am."

"That and the heat and the sun and the dust and the water getting low and a few bullets popping around. And quit callin' me ma'am. I call you Bill. You call me Sue. We may all die out here somewheres and we'd just as well get sort of acquainted before the buzzards get us. Since we started, you've looked as worried as a man with a large family and no job. And all on account of me. I wish you'd quit it. I don't like to feel that I'm a burden on this trip."

Bill Edson twisted sideways in his saddle. There was a grim look on his tanned face.

"A man just hasta worry about anybody he likes. Yo're a heap different from any girl I ever met. Yuh take the bad along with the good and yuh keep yore nerve. Mostly, from what I've seen uh wimmen, they kinda git faintish. Them as don't is the rawboned, red faced kind that's bin raised to a life out here. But gosh, tuh see a right purty girl a-takin' punishment that lots us men 'ud whine about, that's kinda different.

"Yuh see, it's like this. I'm just a cowboy. Never come in contact with many wimmen-folks except the kind I knowed at home when I had a mother an' sisters. An' the other kind that a cowpuncher meets when he's in town araisin' hell. So when I actually come into contact with a girl that is the kind that has their pictures painted in magazines, I git sorta confused-like. I dunno just how tuh say it in fancy words but . . . I reckon I better be shiftin' the pack on that mule, ma'am."

"I'll let you off this time, Bill. But only on condition that you say it all over

tonight when that moon comes up."

"Gosh, I reckon yo're just a-funnin' me. And right now, the way I feel, I can't take a joshin'. I'm glad if I kin make yuh laugh, but if it's all the same tuh you, I'll let Pablo do that moonlight talkin'."

Bill Edson swung his horse around and rode to the pack outfit.

THERE was a hurt look in Sue's eyes when she again joined Smoke.

" 'S'matter, sis?"

"Nothing, Smoke. Not a darned thing."

"Then what's the idea in letting a couple of tears start flowin'?"

"Quit it, Smoky."

"Sorry, little buddy. I didn't know I was hurtin' you." He rode alongside and put his arm across Sue's shoulders. "Is it Pablo, kid?"

"No."

Smoke Galen gave his sister a sidelong glance. Then he grinned at the ears of his horse.

"Funny, ain't it?" she said huskily.

"Yeah. And I hope there'll come a day when you'll laugh with me about it. It's none of my cut-in, but he's a good guy. And he'd crawl on his belly from here to San Felipe to tell you that you're the only woman in the world."

"Meaning just what, Smoke Galen?"

"Uh? Did I say somethin'? Lay it to the heat, sis."

"But . . . Oh, gosh, Smoke, do you think Bill does like me?"

"The guy is loco about you, little idiot."

"And that goes double. But if you make one single crack, if you tell him anything, I'll curl up and die. Promise, Smoky?"

"Word of honor, sis. And while it's as hot as the well known hubs of hades, and my tongue feels like a flannel swab, I'd like you to know that you're a great little picker. That lad is the good old salt of the earth. Have a drink of luke-warm water on me." He uncorked his canteen.

"Nary a drop, Smoke. That leg of yours is not so good. You'll need every drop of water you can get. Save it."

"My leg feels all right. That bullet only broke the skin. Take a sip of this water, little bonehead, or I'll pour it out."

He made Sue take a few swallows of water. "Good girl."

She thanked him with a crooked little smile. "Have you any idea where Pablo went, Smoke?" she asked bluntly.

"I think so. He's cut across to the old Padre mine."

"Why?"

"I think," said Smoke, "that he rode there to kill a man."

X

SMOKE was not far from right. Pablo Costello, traveling light, living on cactus and jerky, rode with his brooding black eyes fixed on the highest peak of the mountains that rose from the edge of the San Felipe desert. Now and then his mouth twisted in a thin, crooked grin. An unpleasant sort of grin that might easily make an enemy shiver.

He seemed not to notice the heat or the thirst that choked his throat. Always, when his eyes found a certain peak of those mountains that took on distorted shapes in the heat waves, he smiled that crooked, bitter smile and his hand slid across his gun.

Hour after hour dragged past as Pablo's horse waded through the heavy sand. Noon. Afternoon. And finally the dropping of that torturing brass ball behind a broken skyline. The blood red sunset followed by the purple velvet dusk and the first chill of the desert night at the edge of the mountains.

There was a round moon and the evening star. Something like a dry sob choked the throat of Pablo Costello. A white moon. And the first bright star of the night God made for lovers—and for raw steel.

"Ay, Chihuahua!" . . . This night a man must die. Tonight this moon must see blood spilled on the desert sand. Tonight must take away the soul of a man. A moon as bright as silver. The cooling breeze that came from the mountain tops. A little spring of crystal water under a tree that had given shade to murderer and padre, to Indian and Mexican, and a few gringos, most of them wanted by some country's law.

Pablo made a small fire, there in the first shadows of a night that was perhaps to bring death. There, by the flickering light of that fire made of mesquite

branches, Pablo Costello took stock of his life, even as a man backed against the bullet-pitted wall of adobe facing the guns of men about to take away that life, might conjure up his final earthly dreams.

There, beside his lonely fire, Pablo Costello balanced his life's ledger. Pitting the good against the bad. Knowing his own mistakes, his faults, his crimes. Crimes against man's laws and the commandments of God.

Now the light of the campfire threw twisted shadows into the big tree above the water hole. An owl screeched its night call. Somewhere a wolf howled. And at the edge of the firelight a gay colored serape covered a motionless outline.

And from the mountains behind, picking a cautious way through the mesquite trees, a man with a gun in his hand crept across the sand and now crouched in the shadows beyond the dying fire of Pablo Costello.

A NIGHT stilled, hushed with the silence that falls across the desert places. Then that silence suddenly ripped apart by the roar of a gun. Bullets thudded into that serape whose colors were dimmed now. Six shots crashing, one on top of the other, so that their echoes were blended into a jumble of sound.

Now silence once more, broken only by the ugly laugh of a man who, gun in hand, passed by the dying fire and roughly kicked the serape that covered the shape of a man.

Now that ugly laugh broke in two. A gritted curse came from the unshaven man who, with frantic fingers, began reloading his empty gun.

Then Pablo Costello's soft laugh from the shadows beyond. A laugh that was too soft, for it carried the quietness of a death challenge.

"And so, Señor Gringo, you think that onder that serape is Pablo Costello, no? But when you have shoot the gon until it is completely empty, you find that under the serape is only some brosh and dirt. Now the gon in your hand is empty. The one that I hold is very well loaded. It is that same gon that killed a gringo named Bob Hutton. You are the tween brother of that Bob Hutton, no?"

The man licked his lips with a dry tongue. "Bob Hutton was my twin brother, yes. Why don't you shoot while you got the chance, greaser?"

"Because there are some things that a Costello does not do. One of those things is murder. I am very proud to know that I have never killed any man without giving him his equal chance."

"You lie, Costello! You murdered Bob Hutton!"

"No more, señor, than I would now murder you. Go back where you come from and tell them that you, a Hutton, owe your life to Pablo Costello.

"Tell the brothers of yours who have put the price on my head that I have held your life at the end of my gon and then returned that life to you. Tell them that. Tell the Señor Krale, your own cousin, that I have done that. And take to your brother and to the Señor Krale and the Herr Herman Hartzel this message from Pablo Costello. That the buzzards will pick very clean their bones if they harm the Señorita Sue Galen.

"You knew that I would be here tonight. How do you come by that certain knowledge?" asked Pablo.

"That," gritted the American, "is my business."

"*Si*, señor, and likewise also my business. There is a place in a man where a bullet can be put so that it cracks the spine. For many hours he endures all the agonies of hell, and after a while, that man dies. I repeat once more to you that question. How did you come to know that Pablo Costello would be camped here at this water hole tonight?"

Now Pablo stepped from the shadows. The gun in his hand clicked to full cock.

"It always gives me a great annoyance, gringo, to repeat a question. If you wish to die rather than give that question an answer, that will be some more of your business. And you will die slowly here, screaming for many hours before the devil takes your soul. . . . Who told you that I would be here tonight?"

BULL HUTTON, twin of the dead and buried Bob Hutton, was no man's coward.

"You said you'd give me a chance to fight. And I'll need an even break, Costello, if I tell you how come I happened to be here."

"An even break if you give me the truth? That is fair enough. Make it your own game. Load your gon, señor. And then, *por Dios,* you weel talk to me. You weel be talking with that bullet in the spine, hombre. Load the gon!"

Bull Hutton, burly, heavy shouldered, thick necked, with a two weeks' stubble of whiskers on his blunt jaw, his cold eyes slitted into red marks of hate. Shoving fresh cartridges into the cylinder of his .45. Bull Hutton, brother of Bob Hutton who had, five years ago, faced the gun that Pablo Costello now held in his hand.

That twisted, bitter smile on Pablo's lips as he nervously ran the cylinder of his gun across the palm of his left hand as if to caress the weapon that he intended for the purpose of death.

Now Bull Hutton's six-shooter was loaded. The two men faced one another in the moonlight.

"Talk, gringo. Who sent you here to meet me?"

"A woman. The same woman you stole from my brother."

"You lie, gringo. You lie like a snake's tongue."

Pablo leaped sideways. His gun spat red flame. Bull Hutton swayed drunkenly on his feet, shooting with wavering aim at Pablo, who laughed crazily now. Pablo's gun cracked again and Bull Hutton screamed like a man torn apart on the rack.

"Tell me the truth, gringo!" called Pablo. "Tell me, or I leave you to die like a wounded wolf. Who sent you here?"

"I . . . Man, don't let me suffer like . . . . I'll tell . . . She's at the old adobe shack—there at the cave. She wouldn't tell me where the gold was, so I got her here by tellin' her you was dyin' here an' askin' for her. That's the truth, Costello, so help me."

"You mean that she . . . that Margarita Mayo is here?"

"In the old adobe cabin. Locked in there with two men on guard. Try and get to her, you murdering greaser!"

PABLO kicked the gun out of Bull Hutton's hand. The wounded man twisted and writhed in pain. But Pablo was showing no feeling of mercy. He stood over the suffering Hutton, his dark eyes burning with hate. While Bull Hutton, twin brother of Bob Hutton, cursed through blood flecked lips.

None too gently Pablo gave the wounded man a swift examination, probing with deft fingers the wound in Bull Hutton's side. Then he went through the man's pockets and money belt, searching. The money and valuables he carelessly tossed aside, keeping only a map made on some sort of waterproof oiled silk. This map he scanned quickly by the light of matches while Bull Hutton, moaning with pain, begged for Pablo to finish him.

It was not a sweet scene, that, there under the round white moon that threw the ragged hills into bold relief against the sky. In the end, Pablo pocketed the map and smiled thinly at the wounded man.

"My gon did not shoot so good, señor. I am sorry to say to you and also to myself that you will live. I will add, hombre, that I make it a promise to see that some day you die. I will send one of your hombres to come and look after you. That is, onless they force me to keel them.

"Now please stop the groaning, gringo. In the tree above there is the owls who watch always here and make the noise that keeps a man from sleeping too soundly. Do not disturb the little owls with such noises. Later, hombre, you and Pablo once more meet.

"I go now to see if you have told me the lies. Better that you do not move moch, because when you move the blood flows faster and some extra movements might mean for you that you die, onderstand? *Adios.*"

XI

TWO men guarded the entrance to the old adobe house near the cave of the blind tunnel that some men said was the lost Padre mine. They were sitting beside their fire smoking and talking and occasionally taking a drag at the bottle of tequila they had brought along.

One of these men was of fair complexion, with light colored hair and blue eyes, yet he was unable to speak any language save the Mexican, for he was an Indian. Tall, well proportioned, unafraid, this fair complexioned Indian, and the man's forehead and eyes and the shape of his skull

bespoke a mind that held a fair intelligence.

Across the fire from him sat a swarthy, evil eyed, cruel lipped man of mixed blood. Murder was stamped in his every expression and every movement. Furtive, with a sort of bold furtiveness that is more dangerous than a brave man's open courage. Plainly, he hated the fair haired man who was sharing his tequila with him beside the campfire. Now the swarthy one was whetting a keen bladed hunting knife across the sole of his boot. The blue eyed Indio watched him without a change of expression.

"One of us, hombre," spoke the swarthy fellow, "must die. The man who would not risk death for so fair a prize is indeed a coward of the worst sort. The gringo has gone to the water hole to meet some man. Before he returns at sunrise, one of us will be lying dead here. The other one will have the señorita and be many miles gone. The gringo will be left here alone to dig for his fool's gold until his hands drop off."

"Better," suggested the blue eyed Indio, "to follow out the plan I have in mind. We shall each throw a knife at a mark. The man who comes closest to that mark, he shall be the one who rides away tonight with the señorita. The man who comes off second best must stay here to wait for the gringo, Hutton. When Hutton rides up, then it shall be the task of the man here to kill this damned gringo Hutton."

"Not a bad notion at all," leered the swarthy one, balancing his keen bladed knife in his hand. Now a knife glittered in the hand of the blue eyed Indian. His eyes were on the swarthy one.

Inside the adobe house, crouched beside the heavy door that was padlocked on the outside, Margarita Mayo, white and tearless in her torn black riding habit, prayed to the Blessed Virgin.

"SELECT the mark," chuckled the swarthy half-caste. "Make the distance ten paces. I will show you, my Indio, how foolish it is of any man to match steel with me."

"We shall see soon enough who is the better man, half blood. For the mark I fasten the glove of the señorita to the trunk of yonder sycamore tree. The glove is the target. The man who comes closer takes away the señorita. The loser stays here to finish off the gringo Hutton. Then the loser goes wherever it is that he wants to go, except along the trail that one of us is riding with the Señorita Margarita Mayo. That is the agreement, then?"

"Even I," leered the swarthy one, "could not have made the contract better to my own liking. Fasten the glove to the tree, hombre. A bargain is a bargain and I feel very sorry for you when I leave you here to the task of wiping out the gringo Hutton."

The blue eyed Indian fastened the small buckskin glove to the trunk of the tree where it showed plainly in the firelight. Each of these rough rivals for the unwilling hand of Margarita Mayo held his knife ready. Save for their knives, the two guards were unarmed. Hutton had seen to that, lest they murder him.

"Who throws first?" asked the swarthy one craftily. "Whoever throws the first knife will be unarmed. What's to keep the other from killing him on the spot?"

"I will throw first, thou half-blooded coward," said the blue eyed one proudly "and if you are too cowardly to risk the chance of your throw and try to finish me off, then, hombre, it shall be my great pleasure to kill you with my hands. Stand to one side while I throw."

The blue eyed Indian braced himself for the throw. Poised on the balls of his feet, legs spread, right arm cocked. Now the knife slid like a silver beam of light from the Indian's hand toward the tree. It missed the glove by a scant three inches, the point deep in the tree trunk.

Quick as a cat, he whirled. But the swarthy one was not minded to murder the unarmed Indian. He was standing there, easily balanced, his knife poised.

"Indio," he sneered, "I will now show you how to beat your throw. Like this!" The knife shot from his hand. It struck alongside the glove, perhaps an inch closer than the knife on the other side. The glove hung, like some symbol of wronged womanhood, between the two shafts of glittering steel.

A cry of triumph from the swarthy one. Silence held the blue eyed Indio.

"Did I not tell you, hombre, that I would win? Have a drink. Drink, Indio, to the winner of the fair prize. Hah, and when you sit here waiting for the gringo Hutton,

you can picture me riding under the moon with the most beautiful señorita in all of . . . *Valgame Dios!* Look!"

FROM somewhere behind them, back in the black shadows, there sounded a faint hissing noise. A steel blade sped like a silver of lightning between the heads of the two men who stood beside the campfire. Both recoiled as if struck. Now their popping eyes stared at the sycamore tree and its target.

There, pinning the glove to the tree, was a beautiful silver handled hunting knife. It was buried several inches in the tree and hung there, piercing the very palm of the tiny buckskin glove, quivering like something alive. Silver and steel and perfumed buckskin.

And now the voice of Pablo Costello, soft, musical, yet somehow deadly and terrible.

"Now, my two mangy dogs of mongrel breed that fight for a bone, vamoose! In the case that you are within range of my gun in two minutes from now, then it will be my great extreme pleasure to give to you each a one-way ticket into hell. Vamoose, dogs!"

The two men fled fast enough. Slowly, Pablo Costello walked across the strip of firelight to the padlocked door. The key was in the lock. With fingers that were a little unsteady, he released the heavy lock and freed the steel chain. Opening the door, he stepped into the firelight, his hat in his hand.

Save for a single candle, the inside of the adobe house was in darkness. Against the yellow light of this one candle there was outlined the kneeling figure of a woman in black. Against the jet black showed the ivory of the most beautiful woman in Mexico.

PABLO COSTELLO stood here, trembling like a man gripped with a chill. His face was ashy gray, his eyes grown strangely soft. With the unsteady step of a man recovering from some swift blow, he entered the adobe house.

"Margarita!" His voice was husky, unsteady. Now he knelt beside her. There in the yellow light of that little candle. Above the candle in its niche in the thick wall, a broken, discolored image carved of wood. The image of Santa Margarita that had stood there in its niche for countless years, neglected, forgotten.

Side by side on the hard packed adobe floor knelt Margarita Mayo and Pablo Costello. Their hands met and clasped. Then Pablo lifted her gently to her feet and took her in his arms. Tears fell, unnoticed, down their cheeks. For the first time across the agony of five interminable years, their lips met. It was a betrothal kiss, gentle, forgiving all, and asking forgiveness.

Now Pablo's body tensed. With a quick move, he pulled the door shut. Just as a volley of bullets ripped the night. Splinters cut Pablo's face as the leaden hail ripped the wooden door. But now, heedless of this new danger that had stalked him, he again took the woman of his heart in his arms. His cheeks still wet, he laughed as he found her lips.

"There is nothing, there can be no force on earth, my Margarita, that can separate us."

"Not even death, my Pablo!"

"And now," he cried, putting her into a safe corner, "we fight to live so that we may love, no?"

Pablo's two guns were in his hands. He stood at a break in the thick wall. Now, exultant, wild, like the voice of a man just back from the dead, he shouted the old battle cry that he had hurled at a thousand enemies.

"Ay, Chihuahua! Cuanto Apache de la lengua colorada!"

XII

SO a *caballero* fought for love and for hate. Laughing, singing, shooting at the men who surrounded the cabin. One against twenty.

There sounded Bull Hutton's rasping, snarling voice as he shouted orders to the renegades who fought for him. There were confused noises as Pablo's uncanny aim found hidden targets in the brush. There was the little buckskin glove with the three knives, fastened to the trunk of the big old sycamore.

But it was not of those things, or of the danger, that Pablo spoke when he stepped back to the corner where Margarita knelt, praying to the broken image of Santa Margarita at whose feet burned a guttering

candle that Pablo would sooner have died than extinguish.

No, it was of love and the moonlight and the begging of forgiveness that Pablo Costello, happiest man alive, spoke to Margarita. And her lips were laughing for the first time in five years.

"You never gave me the chance to explain why I was with that gringo Bob Hutton, my Pablo. He threatened to kill you if I did not go with him. Love that gringo? Never, my beloved, did I care for him. You must believe that, Pablo, tonight.

"In case you die, then I die also, and I want you to know what is the truth. I have loved only one man. To only one man alive have I ever given my lips and my heart. Even when, many times in these past years the news reached me that Pablo Costello was making love to this one or that, I kept praying for faith in the man I loved. I tried never to think that you cared for another."

"You knew there could never be another, my Margarita. You must have known that. Even as you knew, this night when the moon is round, that I would come here to this spot to find out why a signal fire had been lit last night. That signal fire could mean but one thing. That the secret guarded by the Costello name is in danger. I knew that only you could have lit that signal fire."

"But it was not I, my Pablo, who lit the signal. You might know they watched me too well for that."

"Then who lit the signal that brings me here tonight? Was it some miracle of God's?"

"Quien sabe?"

Now the talk of signals and miracles was rudely interrupted by a swift charge of the invaders. And Pablo, once more the fighter, love put aside, yelled his *"Ay Chihuahua!"* and thumbed the hammers of his two silver-handled guns. Shouting defiance, singing the marching songs of the old Chihuahua rebellions, he fought his fight against the odds.

THE door sprayed splinters in Pablo's face. Blood trickled down his cheeks. But he kept laughing, though his eyes were slits of red hate for the gringos who fought to take what was Pablo Costello's. And all the while Margarita Mayo knelt there at the shadow beyond the light of the guttering candle, praying for the life of the lover who had come back to her.

"Ay, Chihuahua!"

And in that shadowed corner, sheltered from the bullets of men who had no God, no code, no mercy, prayed Margarita Mayo. Praying in humility and in a spirit of forgiveness of her sins and thanksgiving for His favors, to Our Lady of Sorrows. The most beautiful woman in all Mexico on her knees there in that adobe house, kneeling on the dirt packed tight by the bare feet of the Indians who had labored alongside sandaled padres.

The most reckless, most courageous *caballero* in all Mexico, jerked the triggers of his silver-handled guns, squinting through the burning powder smoke of his guns. Fighting for the woman, the only woman he had ever loved. Fighting to hold the secret of the padres given into the care of the Costellos.

". . . and forgive us our sins . . ." The voice of Margarita Mayo chanting her prayers.

"Ay Chihuahua!" The crack of Pablo's guns.

Outside a white moon that swung across the star-filled sky.

Then the creeping of dawn across the sky. They would not dare charge now, those renegades who sullenly obeyed the blasphemous orders of Bull Hutton. With daylight came the silence of those guns. Pablo rolled a cigaret and lit it. The little candle had burned itself out. There was the hush of peace as Pablo sat beside Margarita who, utterly exhausted, had dropped into a dead slumber.

From his cartridge belt Pablo Costello took two cartridges and put them carefully on the little spot of white tallow that had been the candle. He counted what cartridges remained. When his cigaret was burned out, he crushed it against the dirt floor. His hands, grimed with dust and blood, held the white hands of the sleeping Margarita.

Well did Pablo Costello know what the next hours would bring. Thirst and gnawing hunger. Fatigue. The men outside waiting for the surrender of the man and woman they held trapped at the adobe house. Then would come another night and more shooting.

Those men out there had grub and water. They would be half drunk from mescal. The boldest of them who tried to make an open attack would drop under the deadly aim of the lone man who fought for all that life held for him.

Then, at the end, when all the cartridges were used, except those last two, Pablo Costello and Margarita Mayo would go together into a world beyond this world. There would be that last lingering meeting of their lips. A shot. A second shot. Pablo Costello and the woman he loved would be no more. But with them would go the secret of the buried treasure.

Later Bill Edson would find them here and bury them. Bill Edson would know where that buried treasure was. But because Bill Edson was a man, he would bury that secret with the bodies of a woman and a man who had added the sacrifice of their lives to that of the lives of those courageous carriers of the cross who had died here more than a hundred years ago.

THE sun crept above the skyline. Pablo Costello sat beside the sleeping Margarita, holding those white hands that, even in sleep, clung to his with a pitiful grip. His jacket pillowed her head. There was a ghost of a smile on her lips. So motionless was she that she might have been dead. Pablo's eyes, softened, shadowed with sorrow, watched her.

Now the raucous voice of Bull Hutton.

"Hi, there, Costello!"

"To you, gringo, I am Señor Pablo Costello!"

"Have it yore own way, Señor Pablo Costello. How's the chances to make a dicker with you and the lady?"

"A dicker?"

"Little compromise, that's all. Tell us where to dig for what we are after and you both get a free pass out of the tight you got into. Tell us where to find the buried stuff and I'll guarantee you your safety and hers to boot. I don't want you and I don't want her, see?"

"So?" Pablo looked over his shoulder at Margarita, who was now awake. He winked at her and flashed her a quick smile.

"So, Señor Bull Hutton? Five years ago, gringo, I keel your tween brother.

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Now you say that all you want is the stoff that is buried. Is that correct?"

"Bob's in his grave, Costello. Killin' you off won't help me. What I want is the good old bullion."

"You mean," said Pablo, his eyes hardening, "that you would sell out to the man who keels your own brother?"

"Bob is dead, Costello. I'm shot in the side and don't feel none too good. I'm willin' to balance up with you, see? You know where there's plenty gold buried. Come clean with me and I'll let you and the little lady go free."

Pablo and Margarita exchanged quick glances. For the fraction of a moment, when their eyes met, Pablo's were soft with understanding. But when he turned from her, those eyes were slitted and hard once more.

"If a man keeled my brother," said Pablo, calling through his improvised porthole, "I would keel that man. There would not ever be enough gold in all Mexico to buy my bullet meant for that man."

"We got you fouled, Costello! No water, no grub, and the ammunition you have gettin' low. Better listen to reason."

"I tell you, gringo," called Pablo, "that the Señorita Margarita Mayo and I would more gladly die fifty times than to give our secret into the soiled hands of such men as you are. But before I die, gringo, I shall kill a few of you out there. When you find the señorita and me, you will find us both dead."

Hutton had no reply, no sort of threat at his command. The voice of Pablo Costello had not been that of a man doomed.

MARGARITA now stood beside Pablo, her hand gripping his.

"Is it death?" she asked.

Pablo laughed softly and pointed to the pile of cartridges he had laid out on the floor. "Enough lead there, *chiquita,* to kill every enemy we have. If we can only hold out until they foolishly show themselves for targets, then we may win. Somehow I cannot feel that we are to die when we have only now found our great true happiness. I am going to try a little trick."

"Do not leave me, Pablo. Do not ever again leave me."

"Leave you? No, no, no. The trick is this: The gringos think that my ammunition must be getting low. They did not know that always I carry two belts for the emergencies just of this description. So now, Margarita, I shall fire the two shots. One, then, in a little while, the second shot.

"They will think to themselves that I have used my last two bullets to save us from capture. We will remain very quiet and after a time the gringos will become fairly moch assured that we are both dead. They will therefore become very bold and rosh the house. When they make the rosh, I will take my gons and make somewhat lower the odds against us."

Pablo aimed at a spot on the opposite wall and fired. After some moments he put a second bullet squarely on top of the first.

XIII

AN hour passed. Another hour. Silence inside the cabin. But still no response from the Hutton renegades. The sun climbed steadily in a cloudless sky. Those renegades out there in the scanty shade, especially Bull Hutton and the other men who had wounds, must be suffering. Inside the adobe house with its thatched roof and adobe walls, there was shade and some degree of coolness that offset, in a measure, the thirst and heat.

There was an olla half filled with water in the house. Pablo pantomimed his joy upon its discovery. One of the two guards had placed it there. Margarita, gripped in the agony of fear, had not discovered it. And beside the olla was a sack made of deer hide that held an ample store of jerked meat and some pinole, the good stand-by of the Indio.

"A miracle," whispered Margarita.

"And if you ask me," said the more practical minded Pablo, "the maker of that miracle was that blue-eyed Indio. Somehow I could not hate that hombre. His eyes were not the eyes of an evil man. He comes from a people as old as the pyramids of Old Mexico. It is my belief, *chiquita,* that the blue-eyed Indio, if he had won the knife-throwing contest, would not have harmed you."

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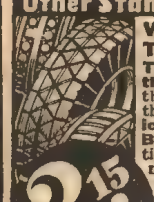

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5.25-17	2.90	1.35
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.35
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.35
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31x6.00-19	3.40	1.45
32x6.00-20	3.45	1.55
33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-18	3.75	1.45

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32x4	2.95	1.25
33x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	3.35	1.35
32x4½	3.35	1.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.45	1.45
30x5	3.65	1.65
33x5	3.75	1.75
35x5	3.95	1.75

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34x5	4.25	2.25
32x6	7.95	2.95
36x6	9.95	4.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
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38x7	10.95	4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

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Margarita nodded. "I am of that same opinion, Pablo. I am glad that you did not kill him. The other was. . . ."

Pablos hand was across her mouth. Now he was at his crude porthole, a gun in each hand. His eyes, bloodshot and slitted, were the eyes of a killer. Margarita crouched back in the corner, watching her white hands tolling her rosary, her lips moving in silent prayer. A prayer for the safety of Pablo Costello. . . . A prayer for the souls of the men who sought his death.

Now a sliver of light through the broken roof touched the little wooden figure, broken and stained by time, in its niche. The image of Santa Margarita. Like a halo. And somehow in the eyes of Margarita, that little figure, with its broken arms and scarred paint, took on a look of strange beauty.

Pablo crouched like a tiger ready to spring. His eyes had picked out the form of a man who moved across an open space between the patches of brush. Now a second figure, and more following. Pablo's guns stayed silent. The time was not yet. Let them get more bold. Let them come a little closer. Let them get ready for that swift rush. Then. . . .

"THEY come!" whispered Pablo. "Lie flat on the floor. They are getting ready now to make the . . . *Ay, Chihuahua!*"

Pablo's two guns broke into a deafening roar. Shot after shot. His teeth showing white. His slitted eyes glittering. His two guns spewing flame. Outside, men stumbled and pitched to the ground. Curses, shouts, groans. Red blood staining the yellow ground. Now they broke and fled in wild panic. Back in the brush came the sound of Bull Hutton's hoarse cursing.

"Ay, Chihuahua, cuanto Apache de la lengua colorada!" Pablo's swift hands reloaded his guns. He taunted them and begged them to try once more.

"We'll come again!" roared Bull Hutton. "The next time we come, we'll get yuh, greaser!"

"Carry away your dead ones and those who need attention!" called Pablo.

"And git shot when we step out?" called a voice.

"No. Pablo Costello is a man, not a jackal. Care for your dead and for your wounded."

TWO men had the temerity to venture out into the open and pull a wounded man into shelter. When Pablo did not make any move to shoot them, they repeated the performance. Again they tried it, and finally there remained only the drying pools of blood to mark the spot where men had died and others had been wounded by the guns of Pablo Costello.

"That was white of yuh, mister!" called a hoarse voice. "That was square shootin'!"

"*Gracias,* señor," Pablo called back. "It is also the way of a Costello."

Now Pablo's voice hardened. "The next gringo who shows himself will die quick. The truce ends here. From now on, it is to the death."

"Your death, greaser!" called a harsh voice. A new voice, but one which put a twisted smile on the lips of Pablo Costello.

"*Buenos dias,* Señor Krale!" he replied. "With you, perhaps, comes the Señor Hartzel, no?"

"He does," shouted Krale, "and we'll live to see you thrown to the buzzards."

"Better men than you, Señor Krale," laughed Pablo, "have made that same promise. Most of them are now but only white bones that bleach in the sun. For you, hombre, this!" Pablo shot at the spot from whence Krale's voice had come. There followed the sound of cursing. Pablo smiled across his shoulder at Margarita.

"The Señor Krale almost had bad lock, that time. It is always very foolish to talk so loudly when only some mesquite bushes hide you. Always remember that, *Chiquita,* when you are honting for a man across the sights of a gon." His laugh brought a smile to Margarita's lips.

It was as if he, Pablo Costello, were not looking into the grinning face of death. He laughed and sang little songs and made playful love to Margarita, who was hiding the fear and sorrow in her heart behind a pair of red lips that smiled. Only in the

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depths of her eyes was written the hopeless ache that she would never show, even to Pablo.

They were trapped now, beyond all doubt. Pablo had counted his cartridges. Twelve. Twelve cartridges. The cylinder of each of his guns loaded. . . . And the two extra cartridges that lay there on the dirt floor at the feet of the image of Santa Margarita. Two filled guns. Two extra cartridges to be fitted into the blackened chambers of the two silver-handled guns that had belonged to the father of Pablo Costello.

And yet they laughed, Margarita and Pablo. Laughed because they must cover the aching lump that lay in their hearts.

Pablo told her little stories of love. Sometimes he sang quaint little songs. Always Margarita pretended to laugh. And so they played their game there in the old adobe house, pretending to one another that death was not near. And at sunset they ate the dried jerky and drank from the olla.

"Our betrothal supper," said Pablo. "You and I alone. You are the most beautiful thing that the Señor Dios ever put upon this earth. To you I say now that whatever else has happened in our lives, this evening and this moon that shall rise tonight belong to us alone, and I am the most happy man alive."

"And I," said Margarita simply, "am the luckiest of women to have for a lover the truest and bravest *caballero*."

Jerky as tough as leather. Water that was warm and stale and bitter with alkali. That was the supper.

But as dusk covered the desert and filled the canyons behind with deep shadows, Pablo Costello and Margarita Mayo took what life gave them as a burden to carry, with a splendid gesture of courage. Neither spoke of death. Neither of them voiced complaint against their Señor Dios. And when their glances met or their hands clasped there was only bravery and happiness and faith.

Now the dusk was broken apart by the rattle of guns. Bullets tore the wooden door. Pablo fought them back with a pair of guns that took deadly toll. And when the hammers clicked on empty shells, Pablo

Costello faced the woman he loved.

"This, Margarita, is the end. Somewhere beyond this world, you and I shall again meet." And into each of the silver-handled guns Pablo shoved a cartridge. The last two cartridges.

"Hold me close to you, Pablo. It is not that I am afraid, but that I wish to be close to you in this last moment of our lives."

"Amen. Margarita, the only woman on earth that I have ever loved. We shall meet. . . . *Madre de Dios!* Listen!"

XIV

"POWDER RIVER! A mile wide and a foot deep! And here we come!"

The night was filled now with the cracking of guns. Smoke Galen and Bill Edson, riding side by side, the cowboys from the Circle Cross behind them. Horses tearing through the brush. Smoke howling his battle cry. Bill Edson's cowboy yelps as he jerked the lever of a Winchester carbine.

Pablo's voice shook as he held Margarita. "*Dios* has sent them! It is not our night to die. When I go out the door, *chiquita*, bar the door and stay back in the corner. There is a bullet in each of my guns. Each of those bullets shall pay a debt. In a little while I return to you. *Adios!*"

Now Pablo Costello was outside in the darkness. A darkness filled with panic-stricken men and fear-maddened horses. Bullets snarled around him as he raced for the brush.

Only once did Pablo pause. That was when he ripped loose the knife from the old sycamore tree. Two cartridges. A knife. . . .

"*Ay, Chihuahua! Cuanto Apache de la lengua colorada!*"

Fighting now with the swift deadliness of a cougar. There, ahead, the figure of a man. A shot from one of Pablo's guns and the man went down. Now Pablo was tearing through the brush. The groaning curse of a luckless renegade who tried to stop him.

"Powder River!"

"*Ay, Chihuahua!*"

Clubbed guns and the slash of a knife biting its steel into flesh. Men locked in

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a last desperate grip as guns spat flame. Horses tearing, riderless, through the brush. Men gone mad with the fighting lust, shooting and hitting and stabbing.

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ON the hidden edge of the fighting was Sue Galen, white and shaken and voiceless, crouched in the shelter of a little cave, a gun in her hand. With her a man who sat without moving. Motionless, calm, unafraid. The blue-eyed Indio who had taken word to them that Pablo Costello and Margarita Mayo were doomed to die.

"I kill who comes." The blue-eyed Indio used up half his English vocabulary when he said it. Now and then his rifle cracked and he would shift his position.

"It's a great life." Sue tried to smile there in the darkness. "A great old life when the breaks ain't too tough. Gosh, but I'd like to be game!"

Now some men came at a run. The blue-eyed Indio shot without hesitation.

"I kill who comes. . . ."

"And how! Golly! Broadway, remember your little Susan."

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the firing ceased. There sounded the voice of Smoke from somewhere in the darkness.

"Okay, sis?"

"Okay, Smoky."

"Good gal."

"Right back at ya. Good guy."

"The Indio still there?"

"Like the star spangled banner, he yet waves. Why the yapping? Come over."

"Can't right now. Picked up a slug in the game leg. Nothin' to fret about but it keeps me from prancin' about, see?"

"I'm comin' over, Skinny."

"Not by a dang sight. Stay put, idiot. Iodine and Three C pills and a week in the old hospital. Always was a gold bricker. A fool for luck, sis. A fool . . . for . . . luck."

"And, my friend, a what you call the great guy," sounded Pablo's voice. "Beel, give to me your ondershirt while I make a bandage."

"Is—is the fight over?" called Sue.

"Over, honey," replied Bill Edson, looming up against the sky minus his shirt and undershirt. "All over but the parade. . . .

Ma'am, yuh gotta take 'er easy. No cryin', *sabe?* Gosh, I. . . . Then jest yuh stay right here where I'm a-holdin' yuh an' cry till yo're done. I ain't mindin'." And with Sue in his arms, Bill Edson motioned to the blue-eyed Indio to help Pablo tie up Smoke's wound.

Smoke winced a little but forced a grin. "Got the slug out, Pablo?"

"The slog is out. Out, jost like that Krale and the Hutton gringo and Hartzel."

"Meanin'?"

"Two bullets in the guns. One knife."

"I get yuh, Pablo," grinned Smoke. "Got a smoke?"

"Planty. Want a drink?"

"Nothin' stronger than water, old man."

"Sorry that I must leave now, but there is somebody who waits for me, Smoke. The Indio will fix the bandage. I return soon with the person who waits."

* * *

AND then, not so many days later, there appeared in *El Liberal's* column for Americans the following paragraphs:

"AVISO! Take notice! This is a formal notice stating that Pablo Costello is not a fugitive or an outlaw. For the benefit of the friends and the enemies of Señor Costello it is hereby announced by the government of the Mexican Republic that Señor Costello, owner of the Padre mine, west of San Felipe, has been publicly freed by the courts of Mexico from all charges against him.

"It is with great pleasure that the government thanks Señor Costello for the splendid work he has done in bringing into this country the outside interests as represented by Señor Galen and Señor Edson, who are working in partnership with Señor Costello at the lost El Padre mine.

"At a formal gathering among the most intimate friends of Pablo Costello it was announced that his marriage to the Señorita Margarita Mayo will take place at the City of Mexico next week. By special arrangement it is that the Señor William Edson will become the husband of Señorita Susan Galen.

"It is with pleasure that this newspaper of Mexico announces this news. The many friends of the parties concerned will be wishing them great happiness.

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"The treasure recently brought into the City of Mexico from the ancient ruins of the old mission of the Padres at the edge of the San Felipe desert goes into the government museum as a gift from Pablo Costello.

"In a recent statement from Pablo Costello it was learned that the Costello family, contrary to the general belief, was not sole custodian of the treasure that was buried by the padres and marked by an image of Santa Margarita. There was a family of Indios who held the secret and one of those Indios had always guarded the spot, a trust handed down by his forefathers.

"Pablo Costello states that it was through the loyalty of this Indio that he and the party with him were enabled to carry out their work. The Indio was killed during the battle at the old Padre mine, probably by a member of his own tribe who had not been taken into the Church.

"This Indio who gave his life was the man who made the signal that brought Pablo Costello to the rescue of the Señorita Mayo. It was this same Indio who took word to the Galen and Edson party that their aid was needed. No man seems to know the name of the Indio. He was buried under the floor in the secret vault that had guarded the holy treasures of the padres.

"*El Liberal* takes this opportunity to wish the greatest happiness and success to Señora and Señor Costello and also to Señora and Señor William Edson."

In the same issue of the paper appeared this item:

"*El Liberal* announces that the rewards on the notorious outlaws Señors Krale, Hartzel and Bull Hutton, go, by the kindness of Pablo Costello, to the school for orphans maintained by the Sisterhood at the Convent of Santa Margarita.

"They were buried in Las Cruces canyon, near the grave of Bob Hutton. Pablo Costello will care for the graves in the proper manner."

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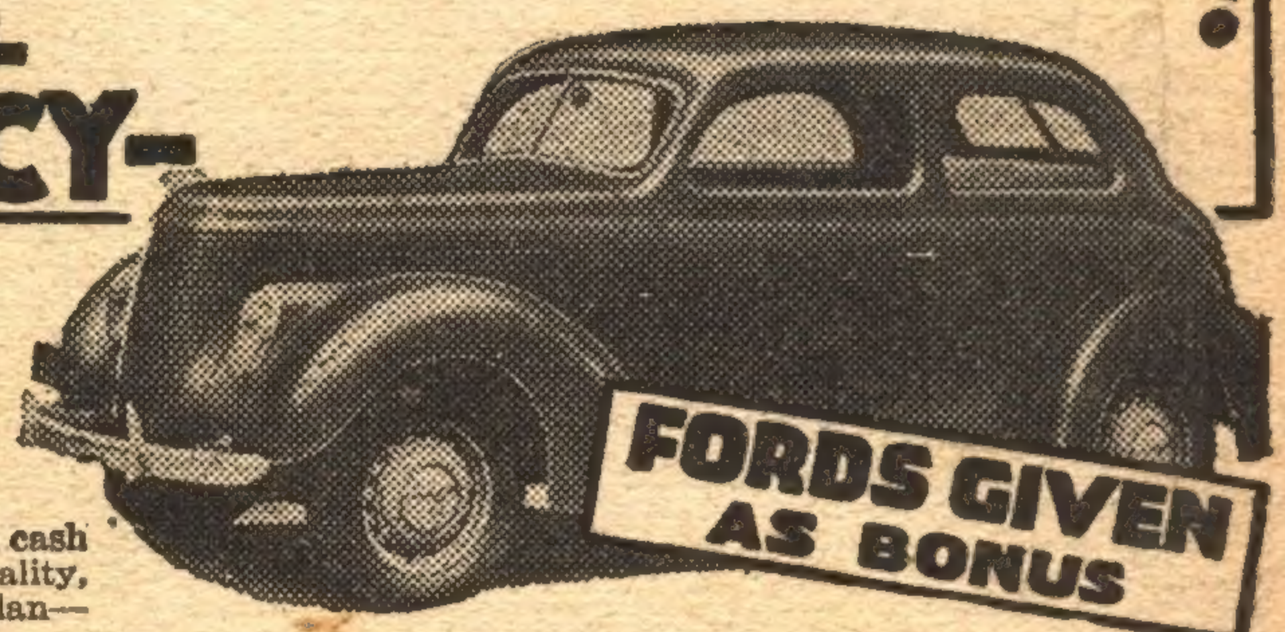

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If you want an unusual opportunity to make a fine cash income operating a Coffee Agency right in your locality, send your name at once for full details about my plan—Free. This opportunity is open to one person—man or woman—in each locality, or two persons operating in partnership. Local Coffee Agency is ideally suited for married couples; wife takes care of orders and handles calls at home, while husband delivers and collects. *Earnings start very first day.* Prosperous business of 200 regular customers quickly developed through remarkable, tested plan.

Wonderful Success Reported by Others

Clare C. Wellman, N. J., tried my plan and later reported making $96.00 in a week. Hans Coordes, Nebr., wrote that he made $27.95 in a day, $96.40 in a week. Mrs. A. Anderson, Conn., sent a sworn statement saying that she made $75.00 in a week. I have scores of reports of exceptional earnings as evidence of the amazing possibilities of my money-making offer to you.

Don't Risk a Penny

You can start a Coffee Agency and make good money your very first week. Thirty-day trial with complete equipment is absolutely guaranteed against money risk. Send today for free book giving complete facts, then you can decide. Don't delay. Details are free—no obligation. ACT AT ONCE.

E. J. MILLS, President
9246 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio

Over and above the cash earnings you make, I will give you a brand-new Ford Tudor Sedan as a bonus for producing. This is not a contest or a raffle. Ford car is offered as an extra reward to everyone who starts in this business.

Free Offer COUPON

E. J. MILLS, President
9246 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

Send your free book telling how to own and operate a Local Coffee Agency paying up to $60.00 in a week. I will read it and then let you know if I want to accept your 30-Day Trial Offer.

Name .....

Address .....

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(Please Print or Write Plainly.)

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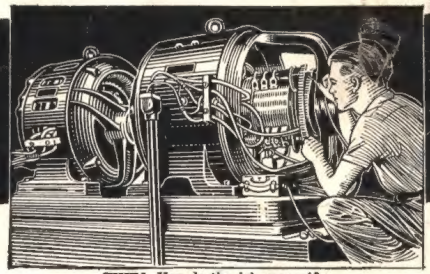

THEN--You do the job yourself.

HOUSE WIRING only one of the many branches you "Learn By Doing."

WANT TO EARN MORE MONEY?

Have you ever dreamed of holding down a **steady, good pay job?** Have you ever dreamed of doing the work you really like in a job that holds promise of a **real future** in the years ahead?

Well, we all know that you can't get the good things in life by just **dreaming** about them. Hundreds of fellows are today holding down mighty fine jobs with prospects of a bright future. They are filling these jobs because they had the foresight to equip themselves with the **right kind of training.** Most of these men were only average fellows a short time ago, but the proper training helped to lift them out of the low pay ranks of unskilled workers. The same opportunity is now offered to **you.**

The great fascinating field of **ELECTRICITY** offers a real future to many men and young men who are willing to prepare for a place in this giant industry.

Here at my school in Chicago, the **world's Electrical Center,** you can get **12 weeks' Shop Training** in **ELECTRICITY,** that can help give you your start towards a better job.

You will be trained on actual equipment and machinery and because of our method of training, you **don't need previous experience or a lot of education.** Many of my successful graduates never even completed Grammar School.

Here in my school you work on generators, motors, dynamos, you do house wiring, wind armatures and do actual work in many other branches of electricity and right now I'm including valuable instruction in **Diesel, Electric Refrigeration** and **Air Conditioning** at **no** extra cost. Our practical shop methods make it **easier to learn—First** the instructors **tell** you **how** a thing should be done—**then** they **show** you how it should be done—**then you do the actual work yourself.**

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". . . . Coyne has first class instructors to teach you the simplest things to start with and they have the equipment to show you these things as you advance . . . ." Ben Rickman, S.Car.

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You can get this training **first**—then **pay for it later** in **easy monthly payments,** starting **60 days** after your 12 weeks' training period is over **—then you have 12 months** to complete your payments.

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Send the coupon today for all details. When I get it I'll send you my big free book containing dozens of pictures of students at work in my shops. I'll also tell you about my **"Pay After Graduation" plan,** how many **earn while learning** and how we help our students **after graduation.** Fillin, clip coupon, **mail today for your start toward a brighter future.**

H. C. LEWIS, President

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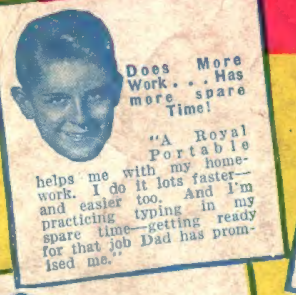

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